

# COVID-19: Guidance for Parents in Talking to Children about Coronavirus

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## Don't be afraid to discuss the coronavirus.

Many children will have already heard about the virus or seen images on TV of people in the hospital or wearing masks. For children, not talking about the virus may actually increase their anxiety and uncertainty so initiating conversation with your child gives you the opportunity to check in about their questions and feelings and provide factual information and reassurance.

## Be aware of your own anxiety.

Children and young people look to adults in their lives to guide them on how to react to worrying and stressful events. If you know that you are feeling very anxious or alarmed, this is likely not the best time to discuss the virus with your child as they may detect your anxiety which in turn will impact how they are feeling. Instead, manage your own stress/anxiety first, take a breath, seek support from another adult in your life, and then reconnect with your child about their questions and feelings. See CDPH's [FAST Tips on Managing COVID-19 Anxiety](#) as a resource for adults.

## Take cues from your child and provide reassurance.

Invite your child to tell you what they may have heard about the coronavirus, and how they feel about it. Children may have developed their own ideas about what is going on or have heard things from peers that are in turn increasing their worry and anxiety. Use honest but delicate language. Don't use terms, which stir up scary thoughts such as "death", "trouble breathing", and "high fever". Use terms like "it can make some people very sick", "some people feel like they cannot catch their breath", etc. Your goal is to provide reassurance that they are safe based on the questions and feelings that they may share with you in terms that are accurate and easy to understand.

## Focus on what you're doing to stay safe that you have control over.

An important way to reassure kids is to emphasize the safety precautions that you are taking. For instance, you can explain that the virus is caused by a germ, just like the common cold, and that the germs do not like soap water and rubbing. This is a way of introducing the importance of washing your hands. At the same time, do not nag your child about touching their face or be critical if they forget to wash their hands as this may increase their anxiety and make them feel hypervigilant. Instead, you can approach handwashing as something you are practicing together as a family-go for practice not perfection!

## Be developmentally appropriate.

The older the child, the more detail it is appropriate to provide but in general don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer your child's questions. Do your best to answer honestly and clearly. It's okay if you can't answer everything because being available to your child and providing reassurance is what matters most. Very young children need brief, simple information and reassurance that they are safe and that the people they care about are safe. They may ask: "Will I get sick?" or "Will granny/grandad die?" Explaining the different measures that your family and the community are taking can be very reassuring as it emphasizes the things that we have control

*This version was released on 03/21/2020. It may be updated with new guidance. Please visit [www.chicago.gov/coronavirus](http://www.chicago.gov/coronavirus) to find the latest version.*

over. If your child is older and you don't know the answers to their questions, you can volunteer to go to a reliable information source together to learn more. For instance, [www.chicago.gov/coronavirus](http://www.chicago.gov/coronavirus) (CDPH) and [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus) (CDC)

**Avoid language that might blame others and lead to stigma.**

Remind your child that no one has done anything wrong. This is just something that happens sometimes in nature just like really bad weather. Viruses can make anyone sick, regardless of a person's race or ethnicity.

**Stick to routine.**

Because many events and normal routines in school and employment may be disrupted by the virus, try to establish a new structure for the day organized in terms of bedtimes, meals, chores, play, etc. Structure is reassuring for children. As part of this new routine, consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19 as too much information can lead to anxiety.

**Keep talking.**

Tell kids that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more and let them know that you are open to talking with them about any question or worries that they may have. Take it upon yourself to occasionally check-in and ask them how they are feeling or if they have any questions. Your child may ask you a few questions and then may return later with additional questions that they may have. Letting them know that you are there for them whenever they have questions or feelings is the most important thing.

For the latest updates, visit [chicago.gov/coronavirus](http://chicago.gov/coronavirus) or [cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://cdc.gov/coronavirus).

Guidance adapted **from:** [Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus, COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): Health advice for parents and children](#), Ann Richards, MS, CCLS

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