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Coronavirus: How To Talk To Your Kids About The Disease

Experts offers parents advice for talking to their children about the COVID-19 outbreak.

By Caroline Bologna   04/03/2020 10:06pm GMT

It's important for parents to go into a conversation about the coronavirus outbreak with a sense of nurture and calm.

As the coronavirus outbreak progresses, parents are facing questions from their children, who have picked up bits and pieces of information (and misinformation) from the internet, TV, teachers and classmates.

The topic is a daunting one to tackle with children, as there's a lot of fear and uncertainty surrounding the illness. But as with any situation of this kind, it's important to present yourself as a supportive and reliable figure in the midst of kids' confusion.

To help guide this conversation, HuffPost asked experts for their advice about talking to kids about COVID-19.

Calm Yourself Down

Before talking to your child about the coronavirus outbreak, take stock of your own feelings of anxiety or fear. If you have a sense of panic, follow whatever steps are necessary to calm yourself down.

"In ambiguous situations, young children often turn to their parents for how to respond and how they should feel," Mark Reinecke, clinical director and senior clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, told HuffPost. "If you're calm and reassuring, they will pick up on this. If you're anxious or frightened, they will respond accordingly."

Kids don't have the same power and access to information that their parents do, so if you're openly stressing out, your children will only know that whatever is happening is so scary that even their parents are worried. And they may let their imaginations take them to a more frightening place.

In addition to modelling equanimity, managing your own anxiety will also free up the mental space you need to listen to and support your children.

"If you remain calm, your child will be more likely to grasp what's important: that events can upset our lives, but we can learn from bad experiences and work together to grow stronger," Reinecke noted.

Initiate The Conversation

Don't be afraid to bring up this difficult topic. You want to be your child's trusted source of information.

"If you have a school-aged child, your child will likely have heard about coronavirus, or similarly anything else happening in the news, whether parents want them to or not," said Rachel Thomasian, licensed marriage and family therapist and owner of Playa Vista Counseling. "I always recommend getting ahead of the game and having a conversation about things that might be scary before they hear a scarier version from their classmates."

Since your kids have likely been hearing about the epidemic from peers and the news, it's not necessary to make a big production out of this discussion. Make it part of a regular conversation and day-to-day routine as you're sitting on the sofa or at the dinner table.

Ask What They Know

"I would start off with asking them if they have heard of the coronavirus and if so, what they've heard," advised Natasha Daniels, a child therapist and creator of AnxiousToddlers.com. "Starting with your child's perceptions or misperceptions will help guide you on where to take the conversation and what corrective reframing you might already need to do."

Asking open-ended questions can help you gauge your kids' knowledge, as well as their emotional state. Encourage them to express their feelings and be sure to tailor the discussion to what you know about them as individuals.

"If you know your child is prone to worry, it can be fine to be generic in being open to the conversation by saying, 'There has been a lot of news about flu season, and I wonder what you have heard,'" suggested Robin Goodman, a clinical psychologist and art

therapist who works with children on stress-related issues. "Continue to hear them out and offer that you are available for questions and to get answers."

Keep It Age-Appropriate

"Parents should approach talking to their kids about the coronavirus with their children differently depending on their age and developmental level," Thomasian explained. "A good rule of thumb is to only use words your child already understands. Start with what they know about this and/or other illnesses and build on that. The motive for this conversation should be to give them age-appropriate information to help keep them safe, quell their worries and to answer any questions they might have."

Under 6

Kids under the age of 6 don't need much detail like the name of a virus or the global threat of an illness because they're too young to process it. Be mindful about conversations you have with your partner or older children in front of your little ones and shut off any troubling images on TV or social media.

Instead, have a conversation about germs, how people get sick and things we can do to stay healthy like hand-washing. If they do come to you with questions about this specific outbreak or something they've seen, offer reassurance that your family is safe and healthy.

School-Age

For school-age kids, you can offer information about the outbreak: what it is, how it spreads and ways to prevent it. But stay away from talk of people dying, especially if your child is on the younger end. Emphasize that the grown-ups in their lives are doing everything they can to keep them safe and protected. And highlight the low number of cases in your local area if applicable.

"Beyond 5, keep your messaging simple and with confidence, 'There is an illness going around right now, so we have to be extra careful about cleanliness and being around people that seem sick,'" recommended clinical psychologist John Mayer. "Kids know sickness and inherently don't want to be sick, so they will understand the concept of prevention."

Parents should emphasize healthy habits like hand-washing, which are good to practice at all times.

As always, you'll want to follow your child's developmental lead when determining the appropriate amount of information to share. Focus on making them feel secure, and limit their TV news and social media exposure, which can create more anxiety.

"Your child may already be seeing individuals wearing face masks in everyday common places. Don't make a big deal out of it," recommended Eirene Heidelberger, a parent coach and CEO of GIT Mom. "If your child asks why they are, answer with a swift, 'Because they feel it's their best way to stay healthy, and every family has different strategies. That's why we are doing a great job washing our hands.'"

You can tell them that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the group of experts handling this situation, doesn't think healthy people need to wear masks. It's also helpful to note that there are lots of doctors and scientists around the world who are working hard to protect people and that the U.S. in particular has great hospitals and medicine.

Give kids a frame of reference based on their past experiences with sickness to understand how COVID-19 manifests for most people — a cold, sniffles, aches, fatigue, etc. You can remind them of times they were sick and then got better.

Preteens And Teens

"From about the age of 10 and up, be factual and don't hide things from them. Stick to the facts as we know them right now and dispel any rumors or alarmist details they may have heard," said Mayer. "Keep in mind they will pick up things on social media, so don't think they are not hearing about this illness."

With teens, you can also dive into the science and politics around the issue. Offer the data and facts you know and empower them to look up information from reliable sources like the CDC. Seek out answers to questions together.

There's a lot of uncertainty around this virus, which can breed anxiety. If your preteen or teen is feeling anxious about the coronavirus outbreak, let them talk it out and be a listening ear. Remind them of past experiences with uncertain challenges and how they coped. It's a helpful developmental exercise for kids to know that there is danger in the world and learn to handle fears, disappointments and negatives.

"It's helpful for parents to say, 'Remember when a tree fell on the house?' or 'Remember when the roads were icy, and we had a hard time getting to school?'" said Gene Beresin, executive director of The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital. "Bring it back to challenging times they can remember. Say, 'We got through it. We've gotten through hard times together, and we can do it again now. Of course we're a little bit worried and don't have all the answers. But we didn't have them back then either.' That promotes resilience."

On the other hand, your preteens or teens may not be feeling this way at all. Take cues from them.

"If they are unconcerned, respect that indifference and update them as you feel necessary," said Heidelberger.

Emphasize That You're There

Ultimately, kids need to know at any age that their parents are there for them to respond to concerns and questions with compassion and understanding.

"Make sure to keep the conversation open," Thomasian said, noting that kids may continue to hear things about COVID-19 from peers. "Let your kids know that if they have any questions or want to talk about it again, they're welcome to come to you. I know that it can get frustrating to revisit a topic multiple times. But not only does having these conversations as many times as your child wants to help them build a sense of safety, but it also helps create a secure attachment between you and your child and helps you become their safe base to come back to."

Emphasize that keeping them safe and secure is your job as a parent. Respond to their needs, be a consistent support system and show that you care. When it comes to the outbreak, show them the ways you're keeping the family healthy.

Be Honest And Direct

When your children come to you with questions, answer directly to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding.

"I think honesty and transparency are paramount," Reinecke said. "Anxiety flourishes when there's a lack of transparency. If you don't have the answer, say 'That is an

excellent question. Let's look it up.' Go to a source you know has useful and valid information."

Goodman advised focusing on the here and now with kids, even if you're thinking about the "what ifs." Don't make fear-inducing statements like "Everyone is scared" or "There's nothing we can do." Instead, offer reassuring truths, such as "We use soap to clean our hands" and "If you don't feel well, come to me, and I always take care of you."

Be sure to separate fact from fiction with kids.

Acknowledge their feelings and share things you do when you feel worried, like reading, exercising or playing games.

"Avoid encouraging them to think about worst-case scenarios, catastrophic possibilities and frightening fantasies," Reinecke noted.

Use Resources

In addition to articles like these, there are other resources to help parents prepare for the coronavirus talk with their kids.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network released a five-page fact sheet for parents and caregivers focused on the infectious disease outbreak. NPR published a comic to explain the news to young people. BrainPop has a helpful animated video and other resources.

Daniels recommended Dawn Huebner's book "Something Bad Happened: A Kid's Guide to Coping With Events in the News" as a helpful guide on how to talk to your child about difficult global events.

Heidelberger encouraged parents to stay up to date with community resources like their kids' schools as well.

"Reach out to your child's teachers and administrators to make sure you're in the know and not taken by surprise news your child receives at school and brings home to you," she said. "A proactive parent is a calm parent and in control."

Give Them A Sense Of Control

A great way to empower kids in an outbreak situation is to show them what they can do to keep themselves from getting sick — and thereby implement healthy habits for the whole household. This helps them feel a sense of control.

"The same prevention tips recommended for the coronavirus are the same as with all other viruses and colds," Thomasian explained. "Don't talk about prevention as a way to scare your child into washing their hands. Instead, talk about the steps you're all going to take to try and prevent all illness, including washing hands regularly, not touching your face, eating healthy food and getting plenty of rest."

She recommended making a chart when implementing new habits and getting kids involved by having them draw out pictures. You can make hand-washing fun by singing a song like "Happy Birthday" or the ABCs.

"Play 'I Spy' to capture your child's attention and fully wash her hands before she loses focus," Heidelberger recommended. "Twenty seconds is all it takes. Then dry them with a clean towel or let them air-dry."

Multiple experts recommended explaining habits like hand-washing and coughing into your elbow in the context of other things we do to stay safe and healthy, like wearing seat belts, having smoke detectors, taking vitamins, brushing teeth, eating with forks and wearing clean clothes. Be matter-of-fact to normalize it.

Kids may also feel good participating in other disease-prevention measures like helping their parents wipe surfaces with Lysol wipes.

"Get your child involved in creating the family preparedness kit, including family solutions in the case of school closings and evacuations and your backup plan for child care in the event your child's school closes," said Heidelberger. "This teaches responsibility and will allow her to take control over the situation in an impactful and visual way."