



## Supporting Children/Teens During Coronavirus (COVID19)

With the ever-changing landscape of our lives as we cope with COVID19, we are trying to determine how best to help our families. As children/teens may be worrying about the safety of their family, struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images coming from coverage of COVID19, and not knowing when they can return to those routines that provided them comfort, they may turn to trusted adults for support, help, and guidance. We hope that this resource will help you think about what you can do to make these times of uncertainty a bit less stressful.

**Start the conversation.** Many parents/caregivers are worried that talking to young children will lead to increased worries and anxieties. The opposite is actually the case—bringing difficult topics into the conversation can actually help to quiet these worries, in children of all ages. Find a quiet, comfortable place to talk. Take a breath and bring it up.

- *There has been a lot of talk about coronavirus. Tell me what you know about it OR Tell me what you've heard about it. For tweens and teens, also consider, Tell me what your friends are saying about coronavirus. What have you seen about this online?*
- This allows the parents/caregivers to listen to what their child/teen knows and gives a place to begin as the conversation continues.

**Correct inaccurate information.** If you hear inaccurate information or misunderstandings from your child/teen, take time to provide the correct information in language your child/teen can understand.

**Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about coronavirus. For example, children may ask if it is possible that someone in the family may get the virus. The concern may be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. This question is speaking to concerns about the safety and security of themselves and those they love. In your answer, stress what is being done in your family, the community, state, country, and the world to reduce risk. Question-and-answer exchanges help ensure ongoing support as your children begin to cope with emotions related to this virus. For example, *while it is possible for someone in our family to get the virus, we are doing everything we know how to do to keep our family healthy. We are washing our hands well. We cover our noses and mouths when we sneeze. And, we are staying at home to prevent us from getting the virus. It's not always fun, but we do it to keep ourselves and everyone else healthy.*



**Validate emotions.** As you have the conversation with your children, ask how they are feeling about this virus. Validate these emotions. While parents/caregivers may wish to say, “you don’t need to worry” or “there is no need to be upset, we will be fine,” it is extremely unlikely this will change the emotion. Unintentionally, it may actually result in children no longer sharing their emotions or believing that their emotions are not ok to have. It is important to acknowledge how they are feeling and to let children know all feelings are OK.

**Help your child/teen to self-regulate.** As we help children/teens to label their emotions, we also want them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate. These activities can include mindfulness, breathing exercises, exercise, and yoga.

**Know common reactions.** Children/Teens may have reactions to this virus. Problems with attention and concentration may arise, which can impact learning in the COVID19 tele-education. Increases in irritability and defiance may be present. Children and even teens may have more difficulty separating from caregivers, seeking more attention. Sleep and appetite may also be affected. Worries and anxieties about what is happening, what may happen in the future, and how the virus is impacting their lives are common.

**Limit media exposure.** Limit your child’s media exposure to coverage of COVID19. Remember children often overhear or see what you are watching on tv or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult, may be upsetting and confusing for a child. For the very young, exposure should be *rare*. Remember to limit your own exposure. Adults, too, may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to the media coverage of this disease. While keeping updated about guidance, remember to get your information from a trusted source such as the CDC and your State’s public health officials.

**Stay connected.** Social distancing is the watchword of the day, but this does not mean that we should isolate from family and friends. Find ways to stay connected through calls, FaceTime, Skype, text messaging, letters, and virtual games and activities. You can connect with friends and neighbors by small acts of kindness such as taking baked goods to leave at a neighbor’s door, bringing up trash cans for someone, or sending letters of thanks to medical personnel or first responders.

**Establish a routine.** Developing a routine for children and the family can help reduce distress during these stressful days. Besides meal time and bedtime, routine can include learning times as well as play time and time for family activities. Be sure to include calm and quiet time for each member of the family too.



**Provide reassurance.** As you talk to your children, remember to provide reassurance and a sense of hope that the actions you and your family are taking will help to “flatten the curve,” resulting in the end of the virus much faster.

**Address missed developmental milestones.** Many children/teens have had missed developmental opportunities due to staying at home (e.g., incomplete sport seasons, not having a graduation or last day at a specific school, missed field trips designated for specific grades). Acknowledge your children’s disappointments, problem-solve if there are ways to honor a missed opportunity later or in a different way (e.g., family will go to trip to DC later in the year or will take a virtual tour of museum or have a virtual birthday now and another at the ½ birthday), or find creative ways to honor milestones (e.g., family has graduation celebration and extended families can make video congratulations messages to the graduate).

**Be a positive role model.** Consider sharing your feelings about COVID19 with your child/teen at a level they can understand. You may express worry, even frustration for what is happening. You may share some anxiety, but it is important for you to also share with your child/teen ideas for coping. Remind them what everyone in the family is doing to stay healthy and well. Talk about the many helpers. Consider how the family may also offer help.

**Be patient.** In times of stress, children/teens may have more trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. They may not openly seek your understanding or support, but they will want this. With adolescents who are searching for an increased sense of independence, it may be more difficult to ask for support and help. Children/teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself too!)

**Practice Self-Care.** As parents/caregivers, you are better able to care for your children/teens if you take care of yourselves. Make sure you find ways each day to care for yourself. Practice good rest/sleep, healthy eating, and exercise. What can bring you calm? Bring you joy? Find one thing to do each day.

**Extra help.** Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children’s/teens’ abilities to function or you are worried, contact your local mental health professionals. Your family physician or pediatrician may be able to guide you to such experts. State mental health associations can also provide guidance. If you need some extra help, seek similar services for yourself. There are helplines as well as mental health professionals providing their services through telehealth.