

How to Talk to Your Child About the Coronavirus

A psychologist offers tips tailored to age.

By Madeline Levine

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Not long after New York City schools closed down this week to help stop the spread of coronavirus, a colleague called to tell me about a troubling conversation she overheard on the street: A boy of about 8 asked his mother if he could have a play date with a friend. The mother responded, “OK, but I’ll only pencil it in. In case, you know, the world ends.”

As child psychologists, we agreed that the mother was way off base in this exchange. What might have seemed like a lighthearted response to her could have been confusing or even terrifying to her son.

Her word choice was probably affected by her own fear as the nation scrambles to respond to this pandemic. When we’re faced with a threat, our executive functions — judgment, decision making, thoughtfulness and self-control — can be overwhelmed by the emotional, impulsive parts of our brains. This is how “a play date sounds fun” transforms into “in case, you know, the world ends.”

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Parents can take steps to avoid letting our own anxiety interfere with how we communicate with our children about the national emergency that has upended our routines. This starts with being aware of their developmental stages, anticipating how they might be processing what they’re hearing, and being ready with responses that are both honest and age-appropriate.

Children under 5 years old

Less is more here. At this age, children think magically — Santa Claus and monsters are still real for many of them. Coronavirus is a vague but terrifying thing they can’t possibly understand. They need to know that they can depend on the people around them for comfort and stability. If you’re OK, they’re OK.

If they ask you a question, answer their concerns calmly and directly. They will read your face, your tone of voice and your body language more carefully than your words.

For example, if a child asks, “Why are so many people buying everything in the store?” a parent might respond, “People are concerned that they may not have enough stuff at home. We have plenty of stuff.”

Note use of the word “concerned.” Stay away from “panicked” “terrified” or other high emotion words. Answer questions directly and oversee public health directives (hand washing, social distancing) with matter-of-fact language — “It’s especially important to wash your hands now” or “We’re doing this to make sure we stay healthy.” That will suffice for most youngsters.

Children 5 to 10 years old

Over the past couple of weeks, friends and colleagues have sent me over a dozen examples or exchanges like the one at the beginning of this article, and they've all been about grade school kids. This may be because while children in this age group have considerably more advanced thinking skills than preschoolers and most can think logically, their thinking still tends to be concrete. They don't quite understand abstraction, sarcasm or irony yet.

A 5- to 10-year-old child might overhear a hyperbolic statement about the coronavirus and say to Mom or Dad something like, "I'm afraid we're all going to die." The appropriate response is a very clear one that invites clarification: "We're not all going to die. Tell me what you heard that makes you think that."

It is important that we do not promote an apocalyptic narrative. Kids this age are less self-involved than younger kids, and so they worry about the impact not just on themselves but on others around them. Yes, you want to educate, but you also want to know what they've heard and how they've interpreted that information. Make sure to ask questions.

Children 11 to 15 years old

At this age, most children have begun to hone far more sophisticated thinking skills. They think both logically and abstractly. They also can understand sarcasm and irony. It is not helpful to talk carelessly about doomsday scenarios, but an older child is far more likely to see the humor in sarcasm than a younger child.

Remember that adolescence is very stressful even in the absence of a national emergency. Kids in this age group are likely to have concerns that feel much more pressing to them than how many people have the virus or how much toilet paper is stocked in the house.

Don't be surprised to hear something like: "This is all ridiculous. I'm going to hang out with my friends tonight. Nobody is sick." The best response here is: "I know you want to hang out with your friends. But we're part of a community and we have to protect not only ourselves, but others in our community as well."

Tap into the part of your child who understands that there are others in the world besides him or her. Adolescents can be very self-centered but also socially conscious. Remind them that their aunts and uncles and grandparents need their help. Sympathize with their lack of access to friends. This is really tough for young teenagers.

And finally, as parents, our first order of business must be to calm ourselves. This does not mean sticking our heads in the sand, but it might mean limiting our own exposure to frantic and frightening media. For many of us, it will require pulling out those behaviors that serve us well in other times of stress — meditation, gardening, exercise, nature. We are showing our children what it means to tolerate emotional discomfort. This is not the last time in life we will face a global threat. And it certainly is not the last time our children will.

This is not the apocalypse. The crisis will pass. In the meantime we will have to teach our children how to deal with uncertainty. We don't have to love it. But we do have to model it.

Madeline Levine is a clinical psychologist and the author of "Ready or Not: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Uncertain and Rapidly Changing World."

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