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Stop a worry becoming catastrophic: how to talk to your kids about the coronavirus

They hear our fears and share them. And they need our help to work it all out

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Parents too often assume that their children are oblivious to world events or are too young to understand what it all means. Particularly younger ones think about and process the world in a way that can make them more vulnerable.

If you seem worried or preoccupied, they will pick up on that too and may be afraid to bring it up with you. I asked a child psychiatrist, Dr Karen Gaunson, and a children's media literacy expert, Saffron Howden, for their thoughts on how to talk to kids about the coronavirus outbreak. This is what they said:

How:

- Choose a safe space and time of day when you can give them your full attention and you aren't tired, stressed, hungry or rushed. Sometimes chatting side by side (while watching something together or driving) can work better than face to face. Things can seem bigger and more daunting at night, so offer reassurance if questions arise at this time, and plan to resume the conversation in daylight hours.
- For younger children particularly, offer (but don't insist) on physical comfort – allow them to set the terms.
- Start by checking in with an open question about what they know and how they are feeling about the topic.
- Validate their fears and concerns, gently offer facts to counter any misconceptions they have (particularly on the level of risk) and explain where your information has come from.
- Let them lead the conversation; anticipate difficult questions but don't prompt these, or overload them with info.
- Don't make promises you can't keep or close the conversation; let them know that they can ask more questions later at any time.
- Set a calm, reassuring tone.
- Have these conversations sooner rather than later, so that you are your child's trusted source of information.
- Be honest but maintain appropriate boundaries; reassure your child that you are OK and have support from others so they don't feel responsible for or worry about you.
- Let them know, if you seem stressed or upset, that you will feel better again soon and that emotional states are transient.

What:

- Keep it simple and factual, and focus on positive messages.
- Reassure your child that most people only get a mild illness and fully recover within a few weeks; that children very rarely get sick and when they do it is usually just like a cold; that pets are not affected. Describe what the main symptoms are and encourage them to let you know if they feel unwell.
- Explain all the hard work that is happening here to protect them, all the doctors and nurses who are here to help us, that we have good hospitals and medicines, highlight how everyone across the world is working together to look after each other, to find vaccines and treatments. If they are concerned about grandparents or others, validate this as a sign of how caring and loving they are and focus on positive messages about the medical care and support available.
- Use the discussion as an opportunity to explore and learn about new things together – for example, how our bodies fight off viruses and that different symptoms of sickness are a sign we are working to get well; or how viruses make us sick and the things we can do to reduce our risk.
- Encourage self-efficacy by talking about and involving your children in planning and preparedness at home, and take this opportunity to set new routines. This could be about hand hygiene, coughing etiquette, not touching your face, an elbow or foot tap instead of handshake (there are some really funny videos online and it will be a fun activity to practice), or stocking up on supplies in case you need to spend a little longer than normal at home.
- In anticipation of disruptions or changes to routine, flag and explain new practices and daily rhythms to reassure. For younger children, this can involve visual cues.
- Assign them jobs and roles, and ways they can look after themselves – it will build resilience and give them a sense of control and agency.
- Give them a frame of reference that they can understand drawing on their past experience, for what the sickness might be like (a cold), or quarantine (school holidays) and how long it will go for.
- Explain that this virus isn't specific to one country or group of people, and strategize with them how to be a good bystander and speak up in the face of racism or prejudice.

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