

# Strategies for Talking with Kids and Helping Your Family Cope During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## **GUIDELINES FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT COVID-19**

Children may have very different reactions and feelings about the current COVID-19 outbreak. They may also have various reactions and feelings about their own and their family's health depending on several factors such as their: 1) age, 2) level of understanding about what is going on, 3) parent's/caregiver's reactions, and 4) past and current experiences with stress, illness, loss, and other types of adversity. It is important that trusted adults are open and willing to talk with children about their feelings and reactions in a way that is at the child's level of understanding (based on age and development). It is also important for caregivers to manage their own worries and stress around their children, because children are very perceptive and look to their caregivers for how to think and feel about a situation. Remember, you are your child's most important role model.

**Tips for talking with young children (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers):** Young children feel stress even when they cannot tell us about it or understand it. Instead, they show us through behaviors such as crying, fussiness, tantrums, and difficulties with eating or sleeping. Caregivers can help young children feel taken care of and safe through verbal reassurance (for children who understand language) and/or through physical closeness and comforting movements such as rocking or swaying while holding.

**Tips for talking with school-age children:** School-age children may show a range of reactions and may need different things depending on their age. Ask your children what they have questions about and provide them with simple and honest answers. Watch for signs that they are scared or overwhelmed and shift from providing information to providing comfort and reassurance. Do not tell them more than they need to know. Continue to encourage expression of feelings through play and physical activity. Children may misbehave or act out when stressed. Remember to set gentle, but firm limits, but also keep in mind that there is a reason for their behavior and they aren't being "bad."

**Tips for talking with teenagers:** Older children and teenagers are usually able to understand more complex situations. You may be able to provide them with more information than younger children and should make sure to answer their questions honestly. Even though teenagers are capable of more advanced conversations, teenagers should not be exposed to all adult conversations or adult stressors. Even teenagers still need reassurance from parents and other important adults that they will be taken care of.

For children of all ages, it's important to limit their exposure to excessive media or adult conversations about the COVID-19 outbreak including associated adult stressors such as losing a job or mental health difficulties like increased anxiety. Talk to children and teenagers in a comfortable space and when you are at your calmest. Remember to keep information simple and brief and at a level that is appropriate for their age. Acknowledge and answer their questions, listen to their worries and concerns, and reassure them that caregivers (e.g., you, family members, doctors, teachers) love them and will take care of them. Provide comfort and try to be extra patient.

## **MANAGING YOUR OWN STRESS DURING THIS TIME**

Parenting is hard, even during the best of times. Furthermore, many adults are not "feeling themselves" and are facing their own strains and stressors related to the COVID-19 outbreak such as increased stress about money and resources, potential loss of jobs, poor health, isolation from friends or supports, lack of child care, and other difficulties. *In order to best care for your children, it is important that you also take care of yourself.*

Here are some ideas to manage your own stress during this time:

- Create and keep a list of community resources such as emergency numbers, doctors, social services, community mental health centers, crisis hotlines, and public health offices.
- Stay informed about the current COVID-19 situation in your region and state, but be careful to limit exposure to information and media when you begin to feel anxious, confused, panicked, or overwhelmed-take breaks from the news and social media.
- Make a list of activities that you find relaxing such as taking a walk, reading a book, listening to music, talking to a trusted friend or family member, drawing, watching a movie, journaling, and the like.
- Try meditation or relaxation exercises; many can be found for free online.
- Engage in family time that is consistent with family interests and cultural values.
- Have some structure or routine in schedules. This makes things feel less out of control and can be very reassuring to people of all ages.
- Try to maintain healthy eating and sleeping habits.
- Remember that feeling stressed, worried, lonely, fearful, bored, angry, or panicked are normal reactions to this very stressful situation.
- Keep (virtual) appointments with your health care providers to maintain your physical and mental health.
- Focus on activities that bring you hope, optimism, gratitude, and purpose-we know these things help people overcome stress and adversity. Know that this pandemic will pass and will not last forever.

### **OTHER RESOURCES WITH RELIABLE INFORMATION AND TIPS**

- Child Trends: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- HOPE: <https://positiveexperience.org/love-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-a-hope-informed-guide-for-parents/>
- Child Mind: <https://childmind.org/coping-during-covid-19-resources-for-parents/>
- PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>
- Groundwork Ohio: <https://www.groundworkohio.org/covid19parents>
- Centers for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html>
- World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

### **SEEK HELP WHEN STRESS BECOMES HARD TO HANDLE OR OVERWHELMING**

#### **Local Resources**

- Call your healthcare provider(s)
- United Way's First Call for Help: Dial 211 or 216-436-2000; <http://www.211cleveland.org/>
- Frontline 24/7 Crisis Services in Cleveland: 216-623-6888
- 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline: 216-696-KIDS (5437); <http://cfs.cuyahogacounty.us/>
- Cuyahoga County Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Crisis, Information and Referral Hotline: 216-623-6888; <http://adamhsc.org/>
- Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center (Greater Cleveland) 24-hour Domestic Violence Helpline: 216-391-HELP (4357); Family Helpline: 216-229-8800; <http://www.dvcac.org/>
- Cleveland Rape Crisis Center 24-Hour Hotline: 216-619-6192; <http://www.clevelandrapecrisis.org/>

#### **National Resources**

- National Parent Helpline (Monday through Friday 10:00 am – 7:00 pm PDT) – Call 1-855-2736 for emotional support and advocacy for parents
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA's) free 24-hour Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24/7) – Call 800-273-TALK (8255); Online chat support
- National Alliance on Mental Illness Crisis Text Line (24/7) – Text NAMI to 741-741
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7) – Call 800-799-SAFE (7233)
- National Sexual Assault Hotline (24/7) – Call 800-656-HOPE (4673); Online Hotline