

Talking with Children Tips for Parents/Caregivers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be stressful for people and communities. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Concern over this new virus can make children and families anxious. While we don't know where and to what extent the disease may spread here in Canada, we do know that it is contagious, and that the severity of illness can vary from individual to individual. We also understand that there are steps we can take to prevent the spread of infection. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm. It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise. It's important to communicate to children and youth the factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety. Below are a set of guidelines to help parents/guardians navigate through this with their children.

Remain calm and reassuring.

- Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your children's anxiety.
- If true, emphasize to your children that they and your family are fine.
- Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to keep them safe and healthy.

Make yourself available.

- Children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions.
- It is important that they know they have someone who will listen to them; make time for them.
- Tell them you love them and give them plenty of affection.

Monitor television viewing and social media.

- Limit your child's exposure to media coverage of the event. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand
- Talk to your child about factual information of this disease—this can help reduce anxiety.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety—avoid this.
- Engage your child in games or other interesting activities instead.

Be honest and accurate.

- In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- Children can be told this disease is spread between people who are in close contact with one another—when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by touching infected surfaces.
 - Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple

examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”

- Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.
- Upper middle school and high school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection.

- Encourage your child to practice every day good hygiene—simple steps to prevent spread of illness. This knowledge helps children gain a greater sense of control over disease spread and will reduce their anxiety:
 - Washing hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds).
 - Covering their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow. Do not share food or drinks.
 - Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off illness.

Additional resources are listed below to help you during this time:

www.saskatchewan.ca/coronavirus

Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/SMA14-4886>

Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Coping-with-Stress-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/sma14-4885>