

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances 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 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.

General principles for talking to children

Remain calm and reassuring.

Remember that children will react to both what you say and how you say it. They will pick up cues from the conversations you have with them and with others.

Make yourself available to listen and to talk.

Make time to talk. Be sure children know they can come to you when they have questions.

Avoid language that might blame others and lead to stigma.

Remember that viruses can make anyone sick, regardless of a person’s race or ethnicity. Avoid making assumptions about who might have COVID-19.

Pay attention to what children see or hear on television, radio, or online.

Consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19. Too much information on one topic can lead to anxiety.

Provide information that is honest and accurate.

Give children information that is truthful and appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child.

Talk to children about how some stories on COVID-19 on the Internet and social media may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.

Teach children everyday actions to reduce the spread of germs.

Remind children to stay away from people who are coughing or sneezing or sick.

Advise children to get into a handwashing habit; tell them to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom; and before eating or preparing food.

Potential Talking Points for Children

Information should be age-appropriate but the following points could be considered:

- The risk of becoming very sick is small but we also need to work together to make sure other people don't catch COVID-19 either.
- Your family and teachers care about your health. Right now, it's safer for everyone to stay in their houses and keep learning from home.
- We know it's hard not being able to come to school, play with your friends, see your teachers, or take part in sports and games—but staying away right now will help make sure that you stay healthy, and your friends stay healthy too.
- Your teachers are really missing you right now but we're working hard to give you work that will help you keep learning this year.
- COVID-19 is spread through close contact with someone who has the virus, through droplets in the air (from coughing and sneezing), or through touching an infected surface.
- Symptoms of the virus are like the common cold or mild flu—fever, cough, or shortness of breath.
- There are many things you can do to stay healthy:
 - Wash your hands with soap and water before meals and after you use the bathroom, wipe your nose, play outside, or handle animals.
 - Cover your mouth with a tissue or the bend of your elbow and wash hands afterward.
 - Use soap or a hand sanitizer if soap is unavailable.
 - Keep your toys extra clean, and wipe off counters, tables, and other surfaces with a cleaner.

Children's Questions and Answers

Below are a few questions children might ask and some quick answers:

Question: What is COVID-19?

Answer: The virus is new—but like other viruses that cause colds, flu and other illnesses, it can make people sick.

Question: How do you know if you have it?

Answer: Most people who get COVID-19 have symptoms like a cold or flu, such as fevers, coughs, body aches or trouble breathing. Kids tend to have very mild symptoms—but they can still spread it to other people, who could feel much worse if they get sick.

Question: What about my parents and grandparents?

Answer: Just like at other times, some people tend to get sicker than others do. Older people, especially those who already have health problems, might have more serious symptoms, but doctors and nurses are doing everything they can to give the best care possible.

Question: Can anyone get COVID-19?

Answer: Yes. COVID-19 is spread through coughs, sneezes, and close contact with someone who's already sick. That's why we have to be so careful to stay home as much as possible, to keep our distance from other people when we're out and to wash our hands as much as we can.

Question: Will COVID-19 come to my community?

Answer: Some people have COVID-19. That's why we have to stay home as much as we can, keep at least two metres away from other people when we leave the house, and keep washing our hands. Doctors, nurses, and scientists are working hard to keep the virus from spreading but they need our help to do that.

Question: What if I have questions or feel afraid?

Answer: It's always, always okay to talk with someone you trust—like your parents or your teacher—if you have questions. Even though you can't be in class right now, your teachers are still available if you need to talk.