

NBC BETTER *How to talk to your kids about the coronavirus (and ease their fears)*

When you discuss coronavirus, be sure to meet your kid where they are developmentally. Match the amount of information and the language you are choosing to their age and stage.

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Whenever an epidemic like the coronavirus makes headlines, it's easy for kids (and grown-ups) to glom onto the scariest tidbits of information and become anxious. "Our brains and our kids' brains are wired to be Velcro to the negative and Teflon to the positive - it's called the negativity bias and exists as nature's way to keep us safe," explains Vanessa Lapointe, a registered child psychologist, parenting educator and author of "Parenting Right From the Start" and "Discipline Without Damage." "I often explain this as our 'sticky tricky brain' because it typically leads us to catastrophize things, having them feel much scarier and more overwhelming than normal."

What is the new coronavirus?

Even though news about a virus like this as it spreads can be alarming, there are a few ways to reassure children by familiarizing them with how news stories are generated when it comes to things like coronavirus, Sierra Filucci, editorial director at Common Sense Media, says. "It's an opportunity to build upon their media literacy skills, so they can understand why the news is reporting on stuff like this, why it's such a big story, and why seeing it everywhere doesn't necessarily reflect the actual danger to their lives," Filucci says. Lapointe and Filucci share their tips to help you ease your child's fears about the coronavirus by age.

Younger kids

If you watch or listen to the news about coronavirus at home or in the car, your little one might pick up on and/or struggle to process some things they've seen or heard. When this happens, it's most important to reassure them that they are safe, Filucci says. "Their worlds are very small and they're really most concerned with their parents, their siblings and their pets, so you want to reassure them the danger is not affecting them. At the same time, try to keep the news away from them as much as possible. Kids that age can't really distinguish reality versus fantasy, so it's very hard for them to put news into context and to understand if something that's happening is close or far away," Filucci says. And when you discuss coronavirus, be sure to meet your kid where they are developmentally, Lapointe says. "Don't talk over them, but match the amount of information and the language you are choosing to their age and stage," she recommends.

School-age kids

"School-age kids are privy to much more information than your young children because of playground and classroom chatter, as well as social media, so be aware that if you aren't talking to them, they'll be getting information and probably from less reliable sources," Lapointe says. "Get in front of this and be the lead person for them in terms of sharing information about coronavirus."

Part of being the "lead person" is presenting information with what Lapointe calls "swagger" - confidence and certainty instead of alarm and pessimism. "As a parent, it is important to be the answer - you don't need to know all the answers," she says. "As parents, you are going to make sure your kids have good hygiene habits like you have always done, and health officials, government leaders, and teachers and other adults are also doing their jobs around ensuring that everyone is as safe and looked after as possible," she says. Lapointe says, to counter the negativity bias she mentioned before, it's important to try to highlight positives without trying to cover up any negatives. "You will be called out by your very aware kids for attempting to hide information and this makes you not trustworthy," she explains. "Just address it (coronavirus) in a matter-of-fact way and move on with swagger."

Tweens and teens

To defuse coronavirus panic in tweens and teens, deploy a combination of reassurance and emotional damage control, Filucci says. "Put it into context - the flu goes around every year and we don't hear as much about it in the news. This is something new, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's something that you have to worry about."

She says situations like these are an opportunity to work with your kid on building news and media literacy skills to separate fact from fiction. "Ask your kid to be skeptical of what they read and what they see. It doesn't mean not to believe credible news, but it means to ask who's creating this news? Is it credible? How can I tell that it's credible? What's the source? Who is creating this news for what purpose? Then, help them find credible information," Filucci explains. "Parents need their own media and news media literacy skills in order to do this because it involves role modeling."

To illustrate this point, Filucci recalls being in line at the grocery store and overhearing a (very grown-up) woman in front of her share a conspiracy theory about the coronavirus with the cashier. "If adults are falling prey to rumors and viral videos with misinformation, you can understand how challenging it's going to be for kids who have less well-developed literacy and reasoning skills," she says.

Remember to listen

In the end, if your child is struggling with fears about the coronavirus, Lapointe says it helps to “make room for the fear and all the emotions that come with it,” by actively listening to them with empathy. “You can say something like, ‘It’s really scary for you to be hearing all about this virus and people who are dying and how awful it is. I bet that has you feeling worried that you or someone you love might get sick and maybe even die. I can absolutely see — especially as a kid — how you would feel this way and have these thoughts. I think that’s probably pretty normal for kids to feel anxious about these kinds of things. You’re allowed to feel that. And, my love, I’ve got you. We are safe and you are safe. I will always take care of you and protect you no matter what. If there is something else that we need to be doing around this for you to stay safe, I’m going to let you know.’”