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Talking to Kids about COVID-19

Attribute to: Allie Jones, child life specialist at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital

How do you explain to children what is happening right now?

I think the first thing is to recognize honesty is very important. Parents can use their understanding of their child's development level to give them an explanation about germs and about how coronavirus is a sickness similar to – for some people – the cold or the flu. Seek to empower kids on things that are in the circle of their control like handwashing or routines they can build into their day. Things like that help give them reassurance of knowing what they can do in this out of control time. We also know children generally follow their parent or their caregivers' lead and sense their emotions, so the more calm parents are when addressing these sort of conversations, the better and more assured the child is going to feel.

Ask what they already know about what's happening right now to assess their understanding, and use soft and simple developmentally appropriate terms to offer that explanation even though it's hard to make sense of what's happening in our world right now.



Allie Jones, child life specialist at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital

Some parents are choosing to limit their kids' exposure to media. In your opinion, is there a limit on how much exposure kids should have?

I think every family is different. Parents can rely on how they know their children best and even in such a new and unfamiliar situation, go off of what they know about their child. Some children do need to talk more and need more explanation, but again when you're filtering it through the lens of what you know about your child, if more information helps them or if less doesn't, those are important things to consider. Offering them a safe space to validate their feelings and have them express their feelings is very important.

How do we help our kids go through this and keep things "normal"?

We're having to rely a lot on our creativity. Using Pinterest or internet searches for finding ideas of ways people can creatively connect with other families is important. You want to promote that socialization and peer support as much as you can. Trying to network with other families helps parents keep their sanity and remain calm. Working on consistent interaction, even building it into your day such as a FaceTime call with grandma in the evening or something

along those lines, can give kids that assurance that they're still going to be able to connect and play as much as they can even in a world of virtual technology.

Some parents have anxiety about the school work and testing their kids are missing. What can they do to ease those worries?

I would say that first connecting with the school is very important. I really feel for parents during this time, because not only are they having to manage a lot of work responsibilities at home but on top of that, managing child care. Parents should recognize they're not alone and rely on their own support systems, including teachers, to help them support their child's education while at home. They should also help to maintain peer connections as best they can. Thankfully, we live in a time with a lot of technology devices that we can use to connect children with their peers to continue their learning, growth and development.

What advice to you have for children who are old enough to be concerned for their older or immunocompromised parents or grandparents?

The first important thing for parents to do is listen and create a safe space for children to process their feelings. Ask them open ended questions about what they know about the coronavirus and how it impacts to create that opportunity for them to share. Again, focus on what's in their control. Focus on the fact that doctors are working very hard to identify ways to support and care for the elderly. Remind them they have a lot of responsibilities themselves of social distancing, maintaining good hand hygiene, and help empower them to see the role they play in giving back and protecting other people.