

WHAT  
PARENTS SHOULD DO TO

# HELP YOUNGER CHILDREN, THEN TEENAGERS?

Know what to do  
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# KEEP EXPLANATIONS AGE-APPROPRIATE

For elementary school students, give simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts. 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 are appropriate. Upper elementary and early middle school children will ask questions about whether they are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. Certainly, concern over this new virus can make children and families anxious.

Acknowledging some level of concern is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. To help reduce that anxiety:

- Give accurate information and facts without causing undue alarm.
- Reaction to events and how you manage your day will be what your children mirror. If you appear anxious, your children will too.
- Let your children know that school officials are working to ensure everyone remains safe and healthy.

Children also need factual, age-appropriate, information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and the spread of disease.

- Teach children positive preventive measures.
- Talk to them about their concerns.
- Give them a sense of control over their risk of infection to help reduce general anxiety.

It becomes critical to look at several key issues when it comes to explaining the overarching fear and panic that has ensued around the world. Most professional associations agree on the following:

# TRY TO REMAIN CALM WHEN AROUND CHILDREN

- 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.

## MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE

- Children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions. Make time to do that.

## MONITOR ALL TYPES OF MEDIA CONSUMPTION

- Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet and through social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your children are present.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety—avoid this.
- Engage your child in other interesting activities.

## STAY AS NORMAL AS POSSIBLE THROUGHOUT THE EVENT

- Keep a regular schedule, as this can be reassuring and promotes physical health. Children do well with structure.
- Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

## BE IN TOUCH WITH YOUR SCHOOL

- Let your school know if your child is sick and keep them home.
- If your child is diagnosed with COVID-19, let the school know so they can communicate with and get guidance from local health authorities.



# TALK ABOUT NEW ROUTINES AT SCHOOL AND SCHOOL NOTIFICATIONS

- For additional factual information, contact your school.
- Share information the school nurse or principal sends home.
- Contact the school nurse with any specific questions.

## BE HONEST AND ACCURATE

- In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment very few people in this country are sick with COVID-19.
- It can spread when you touch an infected surface or object, which is why it is so important to protect yourself.

## WHEN SHOULD I REFER OR ASK FOR HELP?

- Talk to your school nurse, school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker if your child is having difficulties as a result of anxiety or stress related to COVID-19. They can give guidance and support to your child at school.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>

Handwashing and Hand Sanitizer Use at Home, at Play, and Out and About, <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

# CHILDREN'S REACTION TO DISASTER/TRAUMATIC EVENT

The following are common reactions that children may exhibit following a disaster or traumatic event. While the following descriptions are typical, some children may exhibit none of these behaviors and others may behave in ways not mentioned here.

## BIRTH THROUGH 6 YEARS

Although infants may not have words to describe their experiences, they can retain memories. They may react by being more irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled more. Preschool and kindergarten children can feel helpless, powerless, and frightened about many things.

## 7 THROUGH 10 YEARS

Older children can understand their environment. They may become preoccupied with the details of the event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with their concentration at school and affect their academic performance. Children may hear inaccurate information from their peers' which parents can clarify. Can have sad or angry feelings.

## 11 THROUGH 18 YEARS

As children mature, their responses become more similar to those of adults. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. Following an event, that world can seem more uncertain. Others may become fearful of leaving home and avoid social activity.

Teenagers can feel overwhelmed by their intense emotions, yet unable to talk about them.



# WHAT CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS DO?

Parents and other caregivers need to understand what is causing a child's anxieties and fears. Following an event, children are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone close to them will not do well.

Parents and caregivers can clarify misunderstandings of risk by acknowledging children's concerns and perceptions. Discussions can strengthen a child's sense of safety and security. Listen to what a child is saying. If a young child asks questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Children vary in the amount of information they need and can use. If a child has difficulty expressing his or her thoughts and feelings, then allowing them to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened may help.

Parents and Caregivers Can Take the Following Actions:

- Encourage your children to talk and listen.
- Calmly provide information about the issue and plans for ensuring things will be OK.
- Involve your children by giving them specific tasks to let them know they can help restore family and community life.
- Spend extra time with your children.
- Try to keep daily routines for work, school, play, meals, and rest.

# MONITOR AND LIMIT YOUR FAMILY'S EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA

News coverage of the disaster can cause fear, confusion, and anxiety in children. This is particularly true for a large-scale event. Especially for younger children, repeatedly watching images of an event can cause them to believe the event is occurring again and again. Parents and caregivers should be available to encourage communication and provide explanations when children are permitted to watch television or use the internet if images or news about the event are being shown.

Parents can also limit their exposure to anxiety-provoking information.

## USE SUPPORT NETWORKS

Parents and caregivers can best help children when they understand their feelings and have developed ways of coping themselves. One way of doing this is to build and use social support systems of family, friends, community organizations, faith-based institutions, or other resources. In the event an event strikes, they can call on these support systems to help them manage their reactions. In turn, parents and caregivers are more available and better able to support their children.

If a child continues to be very upset by what happened or if reactions interfere with their schoolwork or their relationships at home or with their friends, it may be appropriate to talk with the child's primary care physician or a mental health provider who specializes in children's needs.



# PREPARE YOUR FAMILY

Preparing an event helps everyone in the family accept the fact that events do happen, and that they can do something about it. Families should work together to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs during and after the event. When people feel prepared, they cope better.

## RESOURCES

<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/2020/coronavirus-safety-and-readiness-tips-for-you.html>

<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/emergency-preparedness-for-kids.html>

<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/disaster-safety-for-children.html>