

# 6 STEPS TO EASE CHILDREN'S FEARS AND ANXIETIES ABOUT CORONAVIRUS



*By David McAnallen, Allegheny Children's Initiative Psychologist*

Consider a Mister Rogers' quote:

*"Anything that is human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary."*

## 1. MANAGE YOUR OWN ANXIETY

Be aware of managing your own anxiety about this virus. With changes in routines such as school and daycare closings, working remotely, and social distancing, the impact can be more challenging for adults as opposed to children. Children are sensitive and respond to information within a family as well as through television and social media. Consider limiting exposure to the news. Too much information on one topic can lead to anxiety.

## 2. TAKE CUES FROM YOUR CHILD

Ask children what their questions are and about what they are concerned. This is a disruption and everything is changing. You can start a conversation by asking what they know about the virus. This provides a starting point and allows a parent to clarify and address misinformation, as well. For older children, ask what they've seen on social media. Remember: there is changing, as well as inaccurate information, circulating.

Some children may not be concerned about getting sick and can be more impacted by the disruption in their scheduling. For instance, with schools closing, children may be more worried about not seeing their friends, how they will maintain contact with their peers, or how their day-to-day activities will be impacted. Their questions and behaviors can guide the conversation.



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## 3. BE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Tailor explanations/discussion based upon children's developmental level. Younger children may only need a simple explanation such as: Cononavirus has germs that can make people sick and it spreads by coughs and sneezes. Be aware of explaining the impact of the virus upon older adults, as the information may make children worried about their grandparents. For older children and teens, you can explain the disease at a higher level. Consider allowing their fears and what they already know to guide the conversation. Bedtime is an opportunity and when fears or anxiety for children can emerge.

Children under six have more limited life experiences. Let them know that this is what we do when there is a new germ going around. It is a way to help keep us safe. They may not need to know how rarely this occurs.

Children ages 6-11 need very basic facts and reassurance that they are safe. It is also important at this age to consider limiting media exposure. Keep it simple: "You know what it's like to have a cold or the flu — how sometimes you get a cough or have a fever? This is like that. Most people who catch this stay home, rest and get better. By not going to school, were making sure that most people stay healthy."

Children over 11 often have more control over their ability to learn what is happening through social media and their technology. Encourage them to ask questions. If you don't know the answer, spend some time researching it together.

Tell the truth. Like most situations, it's best to tell |the truth. But don't be overly optimistic. Don't tell them that they'll never get sick or it won't affect them. There is just so much unknown about this condition to say that for certain. Reassure that adults are working on this by explaining what they are doing and what your family is doing to help prevent it. Talk to children about how some stories on Coronavirus on the Internet and social media may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.



***Consider allowing young people's fears and what they already know to guide the conversation.***

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## 4. BE REASSURING AND EXPLAIN WHAT YOUR FAMILY IS DOING

Describing what children can do to help prevent the virus can help them feel more in control, and thus, help manage their anxiety. Remind them of what is in their power, such as managing the virus through social distance, washing of hands, coughing and sneezing into the elbow, and not touching their faces. When children feel like they have something that they can do, it can empower them to do things in order to protect themselves and their family.

Remind teens not to share food, drink or makeup with friends. You can make hand hygiene fun for younger children by singing the "Happy Birthday" song twice or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" for the 20-second hand-washing duration, or making a game out of who can go the longest without touching their face.

A preteen or teen might not feel particularly "cool" being hyper-vigilant about hand-washing. You can speak in realistic terms about the consequences of not taking such precautions, such as being quarantined for two weeks. Children (and adults) should understand that there will eventually be some kind of end to the current Coronavirus outbreak, and that life will more or less return to normal.



## 5. STICK TO A ROUTINE

With schools closing, the family schedule is altered. Children thrive on routine. To the best of your ability, maintain consistent routine and incorporate the educational and learning activities as available. With schools closing, this is a work in progress. [Kahn Academy](#) is a free online resource for learning activities. Many schools are using this resource. Educators suggest a daily hour of reading and mathematics.

Families are getting very creative with virtual play dates using video chat as well as platforms like [Roblox](#), which allows children to chat while playing a video game together. [Common Sense Media](#) is a resource for quality screen-time recommendations. The site is both free and paid, educational and purely recreational — including privacy tips. Duolingo can be used for language learning, [Tynker](#) for coding and Khan Academy for academic subjects. [Epic](#) is a subscription service with endless books and comics for tablets, searchable by age.

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## 6. KEEP TALKING

Make yourself available to listen and to talk. Validate their feelings. Let children know they can come to you when they have questions. Let children know that you will keep them updated as you learn more. The information is constantly changing. "Even though we don't have the answers to everything right now, know that once we know more, mom or dad will let you know too."

**IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS,  
OR A YOUNG PERSON IN YOUR LIFE  
NEEDS BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT,  
CONTACT ALLEGHENY CHILDREN'S INITIATIVE:**

**412-431-8006**