

How should parents and educators talk about coronavirus (COVID-19) concerns with children without making them anxious and frightened? Start with honesty; answer what you can, and in a way you know your child is able to integrate the information, and keep it simple. Answer when asked, and then follow their lead. Children do not always have a point of reference for these types of issues, and this may place them in an emotionally vulnerable place.

Be careful, calm and collected about what you say around children. They are paying attention, listening to the adults in their lives; even if they don't actually hear something, they sense everything.

At the moment, they are hearing a lot, perhaps too much, about the coronavirus. The talk is anything but calm and can be alarming and very scary to children. They see people wearing masks, schools are warning of quarantine, and the media is flooding all of us with worse case scenarios.

Most children know what a cold is or what the flu is; use that as a jumping off point. "The common cold is also caused by viruses, and this is no different in the way that it's spread from person to person," psychiatrist Sarabjit Singh states.

Talk should focus "on washing hands for at least 20 seconds and coughing into the sleeve, not the hand, and maintaining a 3-foot distance," said Singh, executive medical director of behavioral health services at several New Jersey hospitals and medical centers.

Beware media overload! Parents, please be media savvy! You are the guardians of the information your children hear and see at home. Do not allow yourself or your children to become inundated. "Every time you turn on the TV or go on the internet, things tend to get sensationalized, which creates an alarmist attitude," Singh said. "Often this leaves more questions than answers in the minds of kids."

Anxiety has a tendency to take over our brains; once this occurs, the human animal goes into a state of fight, flight or freeze. Most adults have the cognitive capacity and skill set to negotiate with these hijacking thoughts--children may not.

It's important to let children know that with the virus dominating the news, it doesn't mean that the problem is getting worse; they may not be reporting other information about all of the people who are in fact well or recovering. Don't allow the repetitive nature of the 24 hours news cycle to promote perseveration.

Parents should also be mindful of their reactivity when discussing the matter. Children will follow our lead. Try to remain neutral and avoid emotional wording or behaviors. "The experts believe that we should get in front of this dilemma. Don't wait to address the issue. That kind of attitude, whether it's by caregivers, adults or school systems, always invokes more anxiety," Singh said. "It sends the message that adults are keeping secrets. The more people get educated about an issue the better it becomes. Anxiety in its simplest form as a phenomenon is all about uncertainty." Uncertainty breeds a sense of helplessness. Empower your children, help them understand that with your help, they have what it takes to manage whatever comes their way.

If you have a sense that the reaction in your child is reaching a point of concern, seek professional support. Outreach counselors are here for you and your children. Call us today at 412-561-5405, or email us at info@outreachteen.org.

Resources:

www.mtlebanon.org/corona

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

<https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/COVID-19.aspx>
<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>