

How to Talk to Your Teen About the Coronavirus

It can be hard to talk to your teen about something that might be worrisome, especially when you don't have all the answers yourself. Even when you are anxious and stressed yourself, you can still offer comfort by answering your teen's questions and making sure he or she knows you are willing to talk at any time. Here are some strategies and tips that will help you answer your teen's questions.

Top Strategies for Talking About COVID-19

- 1. Listen first.** Let your teen take the lead. Take your cues by the questions he or she has, and how long he or she wants the discussion to last. Find out how much your teen knows about the coronavirus and ask, *What are you most concerned about? What do you want to know more about?* Teens are often less vocal than younger children about their fears and more focused on information they have heard from peers, which may be misleading. Give accurate information, and help them identify what information sources are reliable. In particular, teens may have heard racist comments from peers or media that they may want to discuss.
- 2. Be calm.** Your teen will look to you to set the tone of the conversation.
- 3. Be honest.** Be honest about what is happening. Research on helping teens cope with traumatic events shows that being honest helps to lower their anxiety levels. If you don't know the answer to a question, let your teen know that, and offer to find the answer for him or her. Don't hide the facts.
- 4. Reassure.** Let your teen know he or she can count on the people around to keep him or her safe. You may want to list some of the people working to protect your teen, and encourage him or her to think of others, from loved ones to friends, first responders, government officials, and essential workers.
- 5. Acknowledge.** Give your teen room to express and name his or her feelings—including that this is a hard, disruptive, and worrisome time. Concerns may focus on health, or they may be unrelated, including issues with school assignments and expectations. Sometimes these discussions may pop up while doing chores or family activities together, so be alert for the unprompted moments when he or she expresses concerns. Let your teen know you are listening.
- 6. Empathize.** People of all ages need empathy. Talk together about how friends and family members are feeling. You might say, *I know how hard it is for you not to see your classmates! When I'm on so many work calls, you must be annoyed!* Encourage your teen to share his or her concerns with schoolwork, friendships, and family life in addition to health.
- 7. Ask them to help.** Teens may be less eager to comply with your requests than younger children. But helping other people gives everyone a sense of control and purpose. If you ask, your teen may be more willing to help with tasks that connect him or her to others, such as video chatting with someone who is alone, posting signs in the window, or writing cards to nurses.
- 8. Look forward.** Make plans for activities you can look forward to in the future. Planning for the future can help your teen think beyond the current crisis. Even plans for small activities you and your teen can do together in the future are helpful. Your teen may also want to make future plans for activities with peers.
- 9. Thank them.** Everyone likes to be appreciated. Teens are making big sacrifices and coping with so much change and uncertainty. Your teen may feel that staying home isn't important work, but you can assure him or her that it is. Thank him or her for specific actions like helping you in the kitchen or helping with a younger sibling.
- 10. Listen again.** This crisis is ever-changing, and so is our information. Teens often start discussions while occupied with household tasks. Sometimes the questions will be repetitive, and other times new questions will crop up. Continue listening and talking; it's the best protection you can give your teen.



What is the coronavirus?

The coronavirus is a virus that makes people sick with an illness called COVID-19. Viruses can spread from one person to another.

How do you catch the coronavirus?

People who have the coronavirus can spread it to others even if they don't feel sick, or before they begin feeling sick. When someone who has the virus coughs or sneezes, droplets carry the virus to other people. It can also get onto objects like door handles and tables when someone who has the virus touches his or her nose or mouth and then touches the object. Someone else who touches the same object and then touches his or her face can catch the virus. Wearing a mask makes it less likely for the virus to spread. If you wash your hands and don't touch your face, you are less likely to catch the virus and less likely to spread the virus to others.

What does it feel like if you get sick with COVID-19?

Different people have different experiences, with some people getting very sick for a long time, and many people getting only mildly ill for a short time. Some people don't get sick at all but can still spread the illness. Some people need medical help in a hospital, and even with this help, some people die. Fortunately, teens who get it usually have a very mild case.

Why do we need to stay home? Why are places closed?

Experts figured out that the best way to stop this virus from spreading is to have people stay away from one another, which is called "social distancing." We hope the virus will die out when it cannot spread from person to person because people are socially distant from one another. Social distancing will also give scientists time to find a cure. This is also why schools and some businesses are closed and why many activities are canceled. This helps keep us safe and helps keep other people safe, especially those who are more likely to get really sick if they get the virus. Everyone has to work together to keep the community safe and healthy.

When can I see my friends and other family members again?

I don't know when, but I hope it will be soon! I know you really miss one another. But the less physical contact we have with other people, the less likely it is for the virus to spread, and the safer everyone will be. How do you think we can best keep in touch with them? Could we talk over video chat or send a message?

But if I'm healthy, why can't I go out?

We have to avoid close contact with other people, even family and friends, to stop the virus from spreading. We might have the virus even if we feel totally fine, and that means we could spread it to someone else without even knowing it. We can go outside, but we need to do so safely. We also need to wash our hands before and after touching things that other people touch too, like door handles and elevator buttons. Everyone is being extra careful, so we don't get sick and so we don't get other people sick.

What if someone in our family gets sick?

So far, this virus doesn't seem to make most teens very sick. On top of that, we are doing everything we can to keep you safe. You can do a lot to help keep everyone safe, too. I'm doing everything I can to stay healthy, too. That's why I wear a mask when I go out, and why we wash our hands so often. Even so, it is possible I'll get sick. If I start to feel sick, I'll talk to my doctor right away. And if I ever did get sick enough to need extra help, I would make sure you were well taken care of, too. (If you have specific plans for care of your teen, this can be reassuring information for him or her to know.)

Resources to Share With Teens

Unicef www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teenagers-can-protect-their-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19

NPR www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus

ChildMind Institute <https://childmind.org/article/supporting-teenagers-and-young-adults-during-the-coronavirus-crisis>

First Aid for Feelings <http://teacher.scholastic.com/education/coronavirusworkbook>

A note from the Collaborative:

This pandemic keeps taking us all by surprise. We really do not have a way to predict what will happen next, even though scientists are working heroically on understanding what is happening. There is ongoing tragedy, and hope can be in scarce supply. Taking care of ourselves as well as our teens, trying to notice and find joy in small things, like the sounds of the birds or the blossoms blooming, and reminding teens that life still goes on, can help. Teens can experience wonder even in the midst of tragedy. And they can help us by sharing it with us. We just need to be careful not to make promises we may not be able to keep about if, or when, things will be different.