

## How to talk to your kids about COVID-19

Talking with children about dangerous or scary situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult for all parents. These conversations can be particularly challenging if your work requires you to be exposed to individuals who are known to have the virus.

### **If your child is scared about you going to work, should you tell them you will be fine so that they feel better?**

**No.** It's important to give children honest and accurate information, and you should not promise your child something you cannot guarantee. However, you can reassure them with confidence that there will always be someone to take care of them. Here are some principles that can help:

#### ***Safety and control***

Talk to your children about how people protect themselves from the virus. Make a list together of all the things you do to enhance safety, including not just hand washing, but also good sleep, eating well, talking and exercising. Practice these strategies together.

#### ***Accurate information***

Answer your children's questions truthfully about the dangers of COVID-19, while also talking about the positives like medical advances, evidence of recovery, etc. Answer only the questions they ask; they will let you know if they need more information. Older children will have heard more from the media, so ask them to share what they have heard and correct any misunderstandings.

#### ***Connection***

Because all children need to feel safe and secure, talk about the adults in their lives who will take care of them while you are at work.

#### ***Talk about feelings***

Create a safe space for children to express their feelings, whether with you or another caregiver, and give them full attention. Try not to minimize their feelings in an effort to reassure them. Instead, respect their feelings and help them to identify some active coping responses, for example, "I know you will worry when I'm at work. What's one thing that you can do when you are worrying a lot?"

#### ***Focus on strengths***

Are there times that your child has overcome a fear or anxiety in the past, or are there examples of other people you know coping well with adversity? Talk together about what lessons can be learned about successful coping.

Keep in mind:

- 1) *their age.* How you talk to children depends on their age, older children typically requiring more details than younger children.
- 2) *that some children are more vulnerable than others.* Those who have experienced previous losses or separations may be more vulnerable to fear, and might benefit from extra support.
- 3) *kids are generally resilient.* Research shows that the most common outcome of severe stress is recovery. Trust in children's abilities to cope, learn and grow.

### **Manage your own fears and anxieties**

Children look to their parents to understand how safe or dangerous a situation is. Be aware of your own emotions and what you are communicating to your children, through not just your words but also your tone of voice and body language.

It is okay for your children to see you having feelings like sadness or anxiety, as it teaches them it is:

- a) okay to have feelings, and
- b) important to talk about your feelings, and
- c) good to reach out for support.

If you feel too overwhelmed to have these conversations with your kids, is there someone else in your network who can help? These conversations can happen by phone or video calls. Although there is

much in this situation over which we do not have control, focus on what you can control, like developing a plan to leave work safely. It can also help to focus on the big picture. Are there cultural, religious or family beliefs that support your work and give meaning to your lives? Explore these for yourself and discuss them with your family, as a broader sense of purpose can sustain people through uncertainty.

### **Prepare your kids if you have to isolate yourself or other family members**

When deciding whether or not to isolate yourself, consider your personal risk factors and your family members' risk factors. You will have to balance these risks against the challenges of not being with your family. In these extraordinary circumstances, there is no right answer. Try to make the decision together with any other adult caregivers and older children.

Children thrive on routines and predictability, especially younger children. If you will be separated from your children for an extended time, consider establishing a concrete plan to connect to which you can commit.

- 1) *Emphasize that this will be temporary.* Although you do not know when, this will end.
- 2) *Offer them choices, and together, plan how you will stay in contact.* This will support both your children's sense of control and your emotional connection. For example,
  - a) by phone or videoconference, aim for regular contact and short periods of time, e.g. once a day for 5 to 10 minutes. Your children will benefit from having a concrete, predictable connection to you, as this will reassure them that you are okay. If the scheduled contact is too long, you might not be able to meet your promise.
  - b) when writing to them by email, text, or shared google doc, plan how you can exchange information about your day. Younger kids might need more structure, like agreeing that you each will share (i) one thing you did that day and (ii) one thing to which you are looking forward tomorrow.

Try to avoid the internet, because media coverage typically does not cultivate a sense of calm and control.