



# Northumberland County Council

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

### Talking to Children about the Coronavirus

Concern over the Coronavirus can make children and families anxious. Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

Parents should reassure children that health and school officials are working hard to ensure that people throughout the country stay healthy. However, children also need factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

You know your children best. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them the information that health experts identify as critical to ensuring your children's health. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

When sharing information, it is important to make sure to provide facts without promoting a high level of stress, remind children that adults are working to address this concern, and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

#### Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.
- Not everyone will get the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. School and health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- It is important that all students treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- There are things you can do to stay health and avoid spreading the disease:
  - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

- o Stay home when you are sick.
- o Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- o Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- o Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds).
- o If you don't have soap, use hand sanitizer (60–95% alcohol based).
- o Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

### **Keep Explanations Age Appropriate**

- We recommend that parents of children in Early Years take the initiative to check out what the children have heard or taken in of the situation. Ask your children what is in the news or what they have heard about the virus so you can correct misconceptions. If the children do not show interest in the topic, it is okay to leave it.
- Early primary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate 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. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”
- Upper primary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.
- Upper middle school, secondary and high school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

### **Sources**

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)  
 Child Mind Institute Inc. <https://childmind.org>  
<https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/>

## How to Answer Children's Questions

Below we provide some examples of how you can talk to children about the Coronavirus.

### ***What is Coronavirus?***

The news is filled with items about Coronavirus. I don't know how much you think about it but thought we could talk about it. First, let me say a little about what I know (here, as a parent, you may want to supplement with new information coming from secure sources such as official health websites).

It started in China where several people were infected with the disease. They think it was first transmitted from animals to humans, but we do not know how the first humans were infected. Because the disease transmits through contact between people and many did not know how it transmitted, more people got the disease. Then it has spread to other countries and many people have received it from someone who has been abroad. The disease spreads only through contact from an ill person to a healthy person, through hand contact or through a healthy person coming into contact with body fluid from the ill person. Body fluids are saliva, sweat, blood, vomiting, urine (tissues), and stool (poop). If an ill person touches a handle, table or sink, the infection can stay there for many hours. That is why it is so important that we should not be so close together, preferably one meter apart, and be good at washing our hands and coughing in paper or in the elbow.

Many are working to find out more about the virus so that vaccines can be created to protect against it, but it takes many months to do so. Those who get ill get what is called a respiratory infection, they cough and can get pneumonia. Most get mild symptoms, others severe. In the world, many have died, but very few of those who are infected die. This is a little difficult to understand. But imagine that everyone in a big city is gathered in one place, maybe as many as 100,000 people. If all these were infected, almost all would become well again, but some could become so ill that they died. If you have learned about percentages, the experts do not know how many percent die, but it is less than 5 percent. This means that over 95,000 of the city's inhabitants would become well. We know that the virus is most dangerous for those who already have a serious illness, especially those with lung disease and who are old with weaker bodies. It is the adults who are responsible for your contact with grandparents and other elderly or ill in your family.

### ***Is Coronavirus dangerous?***

Yes, it is dangerous for those who are ill and old. For most of us it is not dangerous, but we can get ill when in contact with a sick person. All those who are going to help the ill know this and want to protect themselves. Now all of us protect ourselves by being careful and

#### **Sources**

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

Child Mind Institute Inc. <https://childmind.org>

<https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/>

washing hands and keeping distance. Most people who get infected do not get serious symptoms, but we must say that the disease is dangerous because it is deadly to some people. But fortunately, they are very, very few. Healthcare professionals who meet ill patients can be infected, and some have. This has mostly happened because they have been traveling and got the virus where they were. Now they have become even more careful to avoid infection from the ill. From previous outbreaks of infectious diseases, they have learned to be careful and protect themselves, so it is rare for health professionals to become infected.

If you are wondering if the Coronavirus is dangerous for children it seldomly is, but may be for children who have a serious illness. Children are usually only slightly ill, and many are not infected at all. And most adults who are healthy have bodies that can handle well if they get ill, if you are scared of your mom or dad getting ill.

### ***Why do so many talk about this virus?***

When adults are so concerned about this, it is because there are so many infected in countries all over the world. Anything that is threatening to us and that we don't know much about is scary and gives us turmoil and uncertainty. Now that so much in our daily life is not as it used to be, it is something we talk about a lot. That is why there is a lot of reporting in the media and this makes both adults and young people more worried. And although those who are leading our health care systems do not believe that the disease is very dangerous for most of the UK, they must prepare for more people getting the disease.

### ***Will it pass?***

We do not know how long this will take. If your school is closed, we know that it will open again. We just don't know when, because the most important thing now is to slow the spread so that we can help those who get ill. In China, where many people were first infected, most are now healthy again. It shows that what we do together now works. As soon as we know more about this, we will tell you about it, but it will probably take weeks and maybe months before we know exactly what is happening. Then we have to live with the situation as it is and listen to what those who lead the country and the Health Service say.

### ***What can children do?***

It is the adults who are responsible for working with diseases. It is in hospitals that the ill are taken care of and therefore you do not have to worry. If your mom or dad works in a hospital or in the healthcare system, then you should know that they are well prepared if they are going to treat any ill person where they work. And those who work there will be careful to protect themselves. Remember that your family is doing something to keep the virus from spreading to others. By following what you have been told about how to wash your hands and keep distance to others you are helping to prevent more people from getting ill.

### **Sources**

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)  
Child Mind Institute Inc. <https://childmind.org>  
<https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/>

However, there are still things you can do:

- Take care not to spread rumours or sensational stories that you do not know are true, be that telling directly to someone or online.
- Try not to frighten younger children (young siblings).
- Play and have fun as much as you can and try to think as little as possible about what's happening.
- Talk to adults and ask them to explain what is happening and what is new, if you are thinking about the disease. Having a fixed 'talk time' every day can be good.
- If you think about this very much, then ask your parents if they have good advice for thinking less. A good method is to set aside a time to think about your worries (worry time of, say, 10 minutes) and if they should appear in your mind outside the worry time, you always say to yourself, «I postpone this worry until my worry time». Doing this every time will make it happen automatically.

### **Additional Resources**

- [A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus](#)
- [CBBC: Your questions answered](#)
- [Coronavirus: Keep it simple, stick to facts - how parents should tell kids](#) - it includes a video of kids asking questions about the coronavirus
- [Coronavirus](#) - video for children explaining the virus and how to stay healthy and avoid spreading the disease
- [Coronavirus: Myth busters](#)
- [ELSA: Coronavirus Story for children](#)
- [How To Talk to Kids About the Coronavirus Video](#)
- [Young Minds Blog: What to do if you're anxious about Coronavirus](#) - tips for young people

### **Sources**

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

Child Mind Institute Inc. <https://childmind.org>

<https://krisepsykologi.no/what-can-we-say-to-children-about-coronavirus/>

*Northumberland Psychological Services - with thanks to the collaborative world EP community*