

# Managing Coronavirus Anxiety - Ours and Our Kids'

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**Most young kids will remember how their family home *felt* during the coronavirus panic more than anything specific about the virus. Our kids are watching us and learning about how to respond to stress and uncertainty. Let's wire them for resilience, not panic.**

Here are some things to keep in mind as we all try to manage life and parenting in this high-stress time period:

1. **Calm yourself.** We have to manage our own anxiety first. Some ideas:

- **Deep breathing:** If you don't know how to do a good diaphragmatic breath, this is the time to learn. Deep breaths that go into your diaphragm and go out slowly through your mouth help activate our parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us calm down.
- **Walking:** Find ways to walk around in open air. We need to get off our computers and phones and connect with our bodies and nature. Commit to a 10-minute phone-free walk each day.
- **Positive self-talk:** How we talk to ourselves has a massive impact on our anxiety. I find it useful to think of anxiety as something uncertain coupled with our underestimation of our coping abilities. We can't find certainty right now but we can focus on our coping skills. Reminding ourselves things like "I can cope with this" and "I can get through hard things" and "I am strong, I can handle this" can be very helpful.
- **Compassion:** Direct some compassion toward yourself. *"It's hard to be an adult right now. It's hard to be a parent right now. This is a stressful time, and I'm doing the best I can."*

2. **Limit excessive reading and talking about coronavirus, especially around your kids.** Being on our cell phones and computers only increases our anxiety. Right now, we are faced with a deluge of information, but most of the information is the same: more uncertainty and waiting. Flooding ourselves with reminders of the uncertainty only increases our panic.

Our kids are paying attention to what we are talking about. They notice that everyone around them is talking about coronavirus. Be mindful of conversations while your kids are in earshot and consider delaying a conversation or reading an article until your kids aren't around.

3. **Validate your child's perception of reality.** Things feel different now than they did a few weeks ago. Let your child know that his perceptions of this change are accurate. If your neighborhood includes people wearing masks, label that by telling your child *"You might have noticed people wearing masks. They are protecting people from germs."* Talk to your child about the coronavirus-focus of conversations and any other changes she may have picked up on. *"You're right to have noticed people talking about 'coronavirus' a lot. It's on everyone's mind. Are there other changes you've noticed?"* Allow your child to talk about what she's noticed, how she feels, and what's been worrying her. Remember that you don't need to convince your child that she should feel any differently than she does - instead just listen, ask questions, and let her know that you'll always be there to talk with her.

4. **Re-assert roles.** Boundaries make kids feel safe. Let your kid know that worrying about safety is the job of a parent. Thoughtful and anxious kids are especially likely to worry during this period, and while you should listen to their concerns, it's important to also let them know that safety is outside the bounds of their family responsibilities. You can tell your child: *"My job as your parent is to keep everyone safe. I*

*take that job very seriously. For now your jobs are to wash your hands and to keep playing and having fun. Let's both do our jobs well."*

**5. Prepare your child for misinformation.** Your child will likely hear many things about coronavirus. Tell your child, *"You may hear things about coronavirus that aren't true. If you have any worries, please come to me and we'll talk about them."*

**6. Label changes and re-create structure.** Tell your child about the changes that are happening. Be specific *"I'll be working from home now, and you have some days off school. The days will feel different."*

Add structure by making a schedule for your child of any new activities or playdates she might have or let her know any after-school activities that were canceled. Kids thrive in routine and predictability, and if your child's school has closed, insert these elements by creating a new schedule for your kids. You don't need to task yourself with re-creating school periods and classes, but rather just by thinking about clearly communicating in writing or in a chart what your child can expect each day.

**7. Be honest.** Don't lie or make false promises. You can be upfront about how hard it is to tolerate uncertainty, for everyone. Honesty combined with your thoughtful loving presence is comforting for your child. Things like, *"I'm not sure about that one, honey. I promise you I am up to date on all information, and I'll continue to be on top of things. Sometimes we just have to wait to find out more. Waiting feels hard, I know. For all of us."* Then give your child a hug.

**8. Add in extra fun.** Silliness and laughter communicate safety, and this is a time for dance parties, light-hearted games, and funny movies. Remember this when the kids are sleeping too. As important as it is for you and your partner to discuss plans and support each other around your anxieties, you also need to take a break from the seriousness. Watch a comedy special together one night instead of doomsday planning. I promise it's one of the best things you can do for yourself in this time of unease.