

How to start the difficult coronavirus conversation with your child

Start somewhere

As a parent, there are always conversations you'd prefer not to have with your children. And when something as out-of-the-blue and unknown as the coronavirus strikes, it's hard to know where to begin. Especially as it's clear that the scientists still don't have the answers.

But children need you to talk to them. They're relying on you for information and, more importantly, support.

Open the conversation as soon as possible. It doesn't matter if you don't get far. They'll know it's OK to come back to it when something worries them - when someone they know starts feeling poorly, for example.

It doesn't matter either that you don't have all the answers, as long as you reassure them that people across the world are doing amazing things - coming together, staying apart - to try to combat the virus. And you are following all the advice and doing all you can for them.

Be prepared to listen

There's information everywhere. Your children have access to the knowledge and opinions of the rest of the world via the internet. It can be difficult to distinguish truth from misinformation. Listen to what your children have picked up.

The tech platforms are making a big effort to take down false stories about coronavirus - but they can't control private messaging. So it's still possible for children to have access to information that may worry them but simply isn't true.

Of course, it's a good thing that there's so much expert knowledge available. We can all listen to different scientists and compare countries' responses, and we can see what seems to be working in real-time.

That doesn't mean you have to sift through all this and work out the answers: you'd need a degree in microbiology for that.

What children mainly want to hear from their parents is that they're on their side. Make sure they know that you and all the people who care about them are doing what they came to protect them, and look after each other.

If they think they're not being listened to, kids turn off. So your job is mainly (at least initially) to hear what they have to say. Let them know you're ready to engage with their opinions and concerns.

Trust yourself

As a parent, you're one of the leading experts on your child.

Reassure them that children are much less affected by the virus than older people. They may be worried about people they know - grandparents, or people with underlying conditions. They may have asthma or other complicating conditions themselves. Make sure you know what the advice is, so you can promise them that everything is being done. Reassure them that everything will be done to protect and look after children.

Use the opportunity to start good habits of hand-washing, which will stand them in good stead long after this is all over. For younger children, you can make a game of it, singing songs while they wash.

Involve older children in planning for self-isolation. What food do you need? What films and games and activities will keep you occupied if schools have to close?

It's easy to feel you don't know enough to be authoritative. It's fine to be honest about your own uncertainties, as long as you are calming and positive. Reassure them that this will pass, and we will all pick up the pieces - and, yes, they will have to go back to school.

You know how to be a parent – that's skill enough to be going on with.