

Helping kids cope with the coronavirus outbreak

Now that the World Health Organization has declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, and cases of the virus are spreading throughout the United States, we are witnessing an unprecedented series of cancellations and closures. Many people are also struggling with anxiety around questions: "Will my family get sick?"; "How long will it last?"; and "Will I have the things I need?" Kids, too, can get anxious, especially as they see the stress of adults around them. How can we help kids cope with the stress of the outbreak and its ongoing effects to our everyday lives? Here are a few tips:

- **Keep adults informed, but limit children's exposure to ongoing media reports about the virus.** This is especially important for young children. Children below the age 7 not only have trouble understanding much of what is in the news, but also have difficulty putting the information into perspective because of their limited experience with the outside world. They might tend to think that the virus is much more widespread than it actually is, and might assume that if cases of coronavirus are reported in your community, it's outside the door waiting to infect them.
- **Reassure children that you will keep them safe.** Help them know what they can do to control spread of germs, like washing their hands and appropriately covering their coughs, but tell them that you are there to protect them and will make sure they have what they need.
- **Prepare.** Don't resort to panic buying, taking more than you might need, but do keep on hand extra food and other supplies if it should become necessary (as it already has in some communities) to stay home for a period of

time. You might wish to involve older kids and teens in these preparations if they are interested in helping. Sometimes doing what we can do helps us feel a little more in control of a scary situation. In your family preparations, consider what you might need to keep kids busy for a period of time if schools are closed. Art supplies, board games and other items that are alternatives to constant screen time might be helpful. The website [screenfreeparenting.com](https://www.screenfreeparenting.com) has a number of indoor activities that can be alternatives to screen time.

- **Retain some routines.** Although many things about our lives can change in the midst of an outbreak like this, try to maintain as many routines as possible, such as bedtime, dinner times, and other activities within the home. This provides a sense of security for kids.
- **Don't make promises about things you can't control.** We would love to be able to promise kids that no one they know will catch the virus, but much is still unknown about how extensive this outbreak will be. Instead, if it is indeed the case that no one in your family or circle of friends has the virus, tell them that it's not that widespread yet, and "no one we know has it right now." It might also be helpful to tell them that most people who catch the virus only experience it like a cold or flu.
- **Consider "virtual visits" with family members and friends.** In communities where people have been advised to stay home, consider using one of the many digital applications that allow for video-based chats. This might be especially important for staying in touch with grandparents and other elderly family members, who have been strongly advised to practice social distancing during this outbreak due to their increased risk of complications from the virus. But *social distancing* doesn't mean *social isolation*; look for creative ways to stay connected.

- **Remind kids that “this too will pass.”** Though many of our routines will change in the coming weeks, coronavirus doesn’t need to change our lives forever. Disease outbreaks last for a season. Young children, especially, often haven’t had enough experience with temporary life disruptions to remember that things can and do get back to normal. Reassure them that any fun parts of life they are missing will be back soon.
- **Spend some time each day in family prayer.** Pray for those who have the virus and for the safety of those who don’t have it, especially health care workers and others on the “front lines” of the outbreak. As we cope with this current crisis, it’s important that we remember the words so often repeated in Scripture: “Do not be afraid.” God is with us not only in good times, but in stressful times, too.

A stressful event like the coronavirus outbreak can help to remind us of what’s really important. Despite the practical disruptions of work and school closures, consider the potential benefits of increased, unplanned time together at home. Use this unexpected time together as a gift to your family. Embrace it as an opportunity for your family to spend some much-needed time together and draw closer to one another.

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