**Talking with Children about COVID-19**

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The Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center (SEEC), founded in 1988, is a model early childhood program that utilizes the Smithsonian's vast collections as the foundation for its curriculum. In addition to its school, SEEC serves the broader community through family programs and educator workshops.

It’s important to talk with children about the pandemic, but knowing how to go about it can be tricky. In this post, the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center shares its approach to talking to young children about difficult and complex topics.

**State age appropriate facts.**

Regardless of age, you should share the facts about COVID-19. Children naturally begin to fill in the blanks if you don’t share information with them and they often begin to build a narrative that can be scarier than reality.

**What does age appropriate mean?**

As an educator or caregiver, you have a sense of what your children can handle. Think ahead about what you want to say to them if you can and remain positive (see below). Don’t dodge their questions, but also don’t add a lot of detail on top of what they are asking. Be clear about what questions children have, they don’t always know how to articulate their concerns, so it’s helpful to restate their questions to ensure you are on the same page.

**Reassure Children**

Children, even tweens and teens, need to feel safe. For younger children, it is helpful to point out that there are a lot of community helpers who are involved in keeping us safe and healthy right now. The very fact that we are all staying home is something that will help lessen the spread of the virus. For older children, you can share additional facts or try to focus on how communities are coming together to support each other.

**Empower Children**

Feeling in control is important even for very young children. Explain to them that we all have a part in this and that their role is good hygiene. Establish new hand washing routines in your home/school, children love visual schedules or reminders. Posting photos of when and how to hand wash can be very effective. We’ve all been told to sing the “Happy Birthday” song, but why not mix it up and find different songs. Come up with new ways of showing love that might not involve hugging or kissing, like a funny dance. Make them feel in charge and coming up with creative approaches can go a long way for young children.

For older children, you may want to speak more about their responsibility to older generations and how social distancing is one way that we are keeping people safe. If you have the resources, think about other ways you can support your community. Maybe it’s making a meal to bring to a neighbor or sharing on social media about where families can get meals while schools are closed.

**Monitor Media**

Limiting and monitoring what your children are exposed to regarding COVID-19 is important. You may not think they are listening to the news program you have on or that conversation you are having with a spouse, but they are. Be mindful of time, access and the messages you are sending.

**Extra Care**

Children of all ages need extra care right now. Depending on your child’s personality and age, take time to check-in with them and show a little extra affection. Understand, too, that a child’s behavior might change during this time because of stress. As caregivers, we want to show some additional patience and latitude.

**Dealing with Stress**

As adults, our instinct is to protect our children. Realistically, though we are not going to be able to shield children entirely from the anxiety of the COVID-19 situation. As adults, our role it to model  healthy behavior. Think about how your family, your classroom and your community can combat stress. Physical exercise (outdoors if possible), creative outlets like journaling, cooking or drawing and mindful habits like meditating or quiet reading can help feed the soul.

**Recommended resources:**

* [What To Say To Kids When The News Is Scary (NPR)](https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716704917/when-the-news-is-scary-what-to-say-to-kids)
* [Mister Rogers Had a Simple Set of Rules for Talking to Children (The Atlantic)](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/mr-rogers-neighborhood-talking-to-kids/562352/)
* [Teacher uses creativity and pepper to explain the importance of washing hands properly (video)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvG6uBq-dV0)
* (list updated 3/19/2020 - We will continue to add additional resources to this list as they become available)

[mage: Mother and Children](https://learninglab.si.edu/resources/view/186835) (detail), by Eleanor Coen.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from D.C. Public Library