

Tips for Healthcare Workers to Talk with their Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We want to start with a heartfelt thank you for the work that you are doing to protect, treat and save patients from this harrowing pandemic. You are in a difficult and unique position as both providers and parents, and we are here to offer whatever information and support we can to make you feel more confident in your planning and conversations with your loved ones.

1. Talking to Children about COVID-19

The conversation around COVID-19 can be difficult, and many of us are tempted to avoid discussing uncomfortable or scary topics. However, giving children a clear explanation of this crisis and answering their specific questions, may stop them from making up their own explanations – which can be scary or inaccurate. Don't try to have the whole conversation at one time, but leave the door open for questions and continued follow-up.

- **Find out what your child knows.** For young children, gently explore whether your child has any knowledge about Coronavirus. Offer simple information you would like to share without introducing unnecessary worry. For older children, assume they already have information from many sources but ask and address specific information they've heard or read.
- **Give information in real time.** Tell your child what the plan is for now, but be honest about the possibility and likelihood of change. Avoid making predictions or planning too far into the future during these uncertain times. This is a way for all of us to practice tolerating uncertainty (and building resilience), which is especially difficult for children. While there are some things we don't have answers to, reassure children that when you have more information, you will share it.
- **Use simple language for small children.** For example, "Viruses are a type of germ that can make us sick. Many viruses would just cause a cold or a fever. Your body is usually good at fighting off viruses on its own without any special help. But some people may need more help – even going to the doctor or hospital – to help them fight it off." For older children, you can go into more detail or use vetted resources like the CDC website to have a conversation about the facts.
- **Explain their risk.** Data suggests that healthy children are at a relatively low risk from COVID-19. Explain this to children directly, such as "There is a new

virus, called COVID-19, which most children can fight off all on their own and is similar to having a cold. But some people get more sick from this virus and need to go to a hospital for help. So we all have to try and keep everyone healthy and if you get sick, you could make others sick without knowing it. Germs spread from person to person so the best way to make sure you don't catch COVID-19 or spread it to someone else is to wash your hands, cover your cough and stay away from people outside our family."

- **Expect a range of responses from mild to extreme.**
 - To help **younger children** express their feelings, you can say something like "Your face looks like you're worried and I'm wondering if there is anything on your mind," or "I understand why you might be sad about that." Try to resist the urge to move young children away from difficult emotions, even though it is natural to want them to be happy. It helps children to know that we can sit with them through hard moments, and that it's normal and OK to feel ALL feelings.
 - Helping your children name hard feelings is especially important for **older children**. By expressing these feelings, and responding with what we do know and a plan of action, you can help alleviate anxiety. For example "It is scary to think that we could get sick without knowing it. But we are doing everything that we can do, and so far that has been working. If you have other ideas, I'm here to listen."
 - For **all children**, intellectually understanding what they are feeling may come more naturally than recognizing where in their bodies they might be feeling it. For younger children, ask your child to point to the part of her body where she feels the feelings. It may help to give an example, like "When I miss you I feel it in my tummy." When children don't want to have head-on conversations, encourage them to creatively express emotions through writing, music, dance, physical activity or drawing.
- **Share your experiences.** When you've found helpful strategies for managing your own feelings of fear, uncertainty and loss of control, include your child by inviting them to participate in one of your practices. Modeling our own coping strategies and sharing our difficult emotions with our children makes our relationships stronger and helps them to feel heard and understood in profound ways. Perhaps you can even find a way to share a laugh in these hard times - such as watching a funny video, sharing a meme or doing something silly to release tension.
- **Involve your child in brainstorming ways to stay healthy.** Let them come up with a song to sing while washing their hands, or a good way to keep in touch with friends from a safe distance. Kids can be very creative and feel more in control when they are given a task and responsibility.

2. Talking About Your Role as Front-Line Staff

We are all in this together. Whether you are an emergency room physician, critical care nurse, housekeeper, transporter or security guard, you are the front-line of this crisis. For this reason, you need to provide additional information and allow for more specific discussion about your role in this pandemic and how it will affect your family.

- **Explain the role you are currently playing with as much appropriate detail as possible.** For example, “My job is to help the people whose bodies are not able to fight the virus easily. I am trying to help their bodies be as strong as possible so that they can get better and get home to their families.” Make it clear you are working and that this is your job and what you were trained to do. This will help normalize a very unusual situation.
- **Give specific details about what you are doing to keep yourself safe and healthy.** Talk specifically about where you will be and what you will be doing. Explain the precautions you take to protect your body, while helping save other people. Take time to explain details about where you will be, how you will spend your time, what it looks like, even talk about what you will be eating and how you will rest. If you have pictures of locations without patients or anyone looking scary, this can help kids have a concrete visual of what to imagine rather than scary things they may imagine for themselves. Understanding your daily routines and getting a better picture of where you will be and what you are doing can help your child cope with their concerns about the safety of your job. This includes washing your hands, changing your clothes, frequently cleaning surfaces, and possibly self-quarantining when you are not working.
- **Give the big picture.** Explaining to children that there are germs in the community already – at the grocery store, the pharmacy and on public transportation – can help them understand that many of us have been exposed to COVID-19 already. You can say something like, “People working in the hospital, like me, wear special clothing and masks to protect ourselves.”
- **Refocus the conversation.** Talking about how you feel when you are helping people at work each day helps your children to feel connected to your mission and passion. Help your children find this same feeling by talking to them about what they can do to help keep other people safe. This is an opportunity to brag about what a hero you are...don't be shy! These are your kids and it feels really good to find out that you are not only their hero, but everyone else's too.

3. Dealing with Various Forms of Separation

While we mobilize our response, many of you will need to be separated from your children, whether in a separate quarantined space or in a different location. You may also be working long and different hours, and have very little time together. This separation is understandably hard

on both you, your child or children, and your partner. It is difficult for anyone to adjust to having to leave their family to bravely serve in the hospital during this pandemic. One of the most difficult parts of this is imagining what this will be like for your child and your relationship with your child. While it can be challenging to adjust to the absence of a parent who is called to duty, rest assured there are many ways to set the tone for keeping a healthy emotional connection during this time apart. With the love and support of at least one adult, children can overcome almost any challenge. There will be plenty of time for reconnection when the immediate challenge is over.

- **Have compassion.** Children may react to learning they need to be apart from you in various ways. A child may:
 - Be confused about why you have to be away from them
 - Be scared that you will get sick
 - Be angry with you for leaving

Keep communicating with your child about these difficult feelings. Be prepared to be open and listen rather than try and talk them out of any particular feeling.

- **Communicate.** Plan a system for how your children can reach you when you are out of the house. Try having them keep track of questions or topics to discuss with you, and review them when you connect. Make sure they know you are open and available whenever possible, and keep the door open for communication.
- **Get Creative** to create a few new rituals.
 - Write little surprise notes, drawings or jokes for your child to find throughout the day (or for a co-parent/caretaker to leave for your child). These can be as simple as “good morning sunshine” or “have a great day” or more complex for older children.
 - Use technology. Create bedtime videos or just quick video messages that your co-parent/another adult can play when you’re not home.
 - Include your child in coming up with creative ways for keeping each other smiling while apart.

4. Tips for Co-Parents or Caretakers:

- **Maintain routines to the extent that you can.** Keeping a predictable schedule can help your child cope with the unpredictable and uncertain. You may even add a superhero sticker to each day that one parent is working in the hospital.
- **Don't change your "house rules."** You may be tempted to remove all discipline and boundaries right now, as you worry about your child’s well being or struggle to watch them in the normal everyday stress of not getting to do what

they want. While this feels like you are being “nice,” it is often unsettling for children. Therefore, even while you may allow a few new behaviors and practices - such as more screen-time or less healthy meals - it's important for children to understand that even though things have changed, they can still count on certain consistencies like discipline.

- **Limit watching the news.** News coverage makes both imagery and information as scary as possible to attract viewers and keep them engaged. Given that your family member is in the hospital working, it is especially harmful for children to hear the news at this time. If your child is older and interested in watching television coverage, try to do so together - only with you or another adult present. Make sure to also get frequent questions and concerns answered by the parent who is on the front-line, since their information is most accurate to the circumstances they face.
- **Establish one voice and one message.** Make sure all adults in the home are on the same page when it comes to information or practices. Hearing disagreement from one adult to another (for example, a co-parents stress that his or her spouse isn't taking all necessary precautions) is very unsettling. Make sure to communicate consistently to children whenever possible, and acknowledge when information is changing or updated.

5. Managing Uncertainty

These uncertain times are the perfect recipe for anxiety. At this heightened state of unknown, with information changing every hour, even the steadiest among us, will experience some ongoing stress. Your body's natural response to this - called a stress response - is one in which you go into fight, flight or freeze in the face of a threat. While in some cases you may perceive a threat that is not real, this is one scenario in which your concerns are certainly valid. It would be unwise to have ZERO stress response in these circumstances, as this response is what keeps us safe. Some amount of stress, that which propels us into action, is good, while excess stress is counterproductive.

You may not be conscious of your stress response but your body knows it is happening. And since you cannot fight, flight or freeze in this case, here a few ways you can bring stress to the forefront, begin to deal with it and have confidence in your capacity to tolerate this level of discomfort.

- Since uncertainty is fueling this stress response, try to differentiate between what you can and cannot control. Worries that have solutions are known as Productive Worries. An example may include the worry that you are spreading germs, where the solution is taking proper precautions with hand washing.
- An Unproductive Worry is one where there is no immediate action to take. An example of this type of worry would be wondering how long this pandemic will last or when life will return to normal. Since there are no solutions to these

unanswerable questions, these worries are often trapped in your head and it is natural to make many attempts to over-solve an unsolvable scenario and accidentally create more distress. You cannot THINK your way out of uncertainty – no matter how hard you try.

- Understanding that you can tolerate some level of uncertainty will not only help you thrive under challenging conditions, but will also support your children as they look to you to learn how best to respond to adversity. A few strategies include meditation, exercise, self-care and acceptance. When you have adaptive strategies to work through uncertainty, you are reinforcing that you have capacity to work through this type of stress. Keep in mind, these are good practices for anyone, anytime, even when you are not in extraordinary circumstances.
- Remember that none of us learns well under stress. We are all adapting to this crisis in different ways and need to be patient with ourselves and others. Our children may have trouble with their usual tasks, difficulty with changes in routine and experience challenges we do not anticipate. This is all normal and expected, and requires your compassion and understanding.
- Consider other recent or past events that may be influencing your family's reaction. All of us have unique experiences and some children who have already experienced trauma, particularly related to physical health or illness, may be at an increased risk for emotional distress. Pay particular attention in these situations and seek additional support as needed.

6. What to Do with More Questions and Concerns

The Mount Sinai Parenting Center will be available to answer any and all parenting questions during this difficult time. Email us at parentingcenter@mountsinai.org.

For other resources on providing support and structure, educational activities and ways to manage indefinite time at home, visit www.seedlingsgroup.com/resources

For more information on wellness programs and support through Mount Sinai, visit www.mountsinai.org/about/covid19/staff/resources/well-being