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## Talking To Kids About Diseases in the News



Adults are not the only ones concerned about the threat of diseases. When a major infectious disease outbreak hits the news, children too are exposed to the mounting public attention and media coverage, and many may feel frightened or confused.

It's common for children to feel anxious about the unknown, and they will look to their parents to provide support and comfort. Children follow their parents' cues, so if mom or dad seem stressed or are constantly talking about how worried they are, they will pick up on that. If parents cope well, their child will also cope better.

### **Calm reassurance is key**

The first step in helping children manage their anxiety is to address and acknowledge their fears without causing alarm or panic. Reassure your child that everyone in the family is fine and that you will all work together to stay healthy. Being calm and confident will do wonders in helping a child feel safe and secure.

Be proactive and ask your children what they have heard. This will indicate whether there are any rumors or misinformation that you need to address. Knowledge and accurate information can help children feel a sense of control, so parents should also be prepared to provide some simple, age-appropriate facts.

Younger children need equal amounts of fact and reassurance. Older kids and teens will likely have more specific questions or may need help separating fact from fiction.

Although we want to shelter our children, it's important to provide honest, accurate information that is suitable for their age group.

### **Ways to reduce your child's anxiety**

Here are other ways parents can help ease their child's anxiety and maintain their well-being:

- Be sure you are up to the date on the latest information, including symptoms, vaccinations and how the disease spreads. The websites of the Rhode Island Department of Health

(<https://health.ri.gov/covid/>) and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>) are reliable resources.

- Allow youngsters to express their feelings and let them know it is OK to be afraid or upset. Keep in mind that when children are uncertain about situations and feel frightened, they may need even more affection and attention.
- Even if the family's normal routine is disrupted due to school or work closures, try to keep activities as consistent and normal as possible. Children are most comfortable when they can stick with their routines.
- Encourage healthy behaviors – such as eating well, getting a good night's sleep, and playing outside – that can help children build a strong immune system.
- Remind your children not to share their food or drinks with others.
- Try to limit children's exposure to media coverage.
- If your children are being vaccinated, remind them why this is important and how the vaccine will help keep them safe and healthy.
- Keep your children home when they are sick. They should remain out of school until they are free of fever for 24 hours without the use of a fever-reducing medication.
- Remind children of proper hand-washing technique, as this is one of the best ways to reduce the spread of infection.

### **Where to Get Help**

Kids' Link RI at 1-855-543-5465 (KID LINK) is a pediatric behavioral health triage service and referral network that can help parents access treatment for their child.

BH Link at 401-404-5465 enables all Rhode Islanders 18 and older who are experiencing mental health and substance use crises to receive the appropriate services they need as quickly as possible.