

Storytelling to Help Children Understand COVID-19

Talking with your child about COVID-19 is important. Our world has been turned upside down in response to the pandemic, leaving us feeling uncertain, worried, exhausted and afraid. Your young child is picking up on your emotions as well as having his/her own emotional responses to all the changes. Children are looking to adults for guidance on how to understand and react to this stressful situation. Calmly providing a developmentally appropriate explanation and reassurance will put children's worries at ease. Here is some guidance on how to do so.

Why does storytelling/narration work?

We have two sides to our brain, the right and the left, that function very differently. The right side of our brain specializes in emotions, images and personal memories. The right side of the brain communicates by sending and receiving nonverbal communication such as eye contact, body posture and tone of voice. The left brain is logical, linear, literal and linguistic. It likes facts, words and order. Children, especially children under the age of 3, are right brain dominated. When children become upset, they become even more right-brain dominated. Storytelling or narration help bring together the right and left side of the brain.¹ As a result, you see children calm. In addition, storytelling can help children understand what is happening and what will happen next, leaving them feeling safe and less anxious. More importantly, it is an opportunity for you and your child to connect.

What to include in your story?

1. Explain what COVID-19 is: "Viruses are germs. You cannot see them, but they can make us sick. COVID is a very strong germ. Germs travel very easy from one person to the next."
2. Name the changes/responses: "Because COVID is such a strong germ, we have to make safe choices to keep our bodies healthy. For example, we now wear masks when we leave the house so that the germs do not travel so quickly."
3. Name the emotions: "You may be having big feelings about COVID. It looks like you are worried."
4. Provide reassurance: "We are making all these changes to keep you and our family healthy and safe."
5. Name what the child can do to stay healthy: "Washing your hands a lot will help protect you."
6. Name what a child can still do: "We cannot visit grandma, but we can video call her." "You cannot hug our neighbor, but we can wave hello."
7. Offer support and skills: "If you become upset, you can talk to me, take a deep breath or look at a book."

¹ Siegel, D. J. & Bryson, T.A. (2012). *The whole-brain child*. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks

How to use storytelling

Some children may need to hear the story multiple times. They may even need to hear it multiple times a day! As you tell the story make sure that you pause to ask and answer questions. Be present and enjoy this time together.

Be Prepared for challenges

Know that with any change or stress there will be ups and downs. It is typical that children will experience challenging behaviors while adjusting this new normal. Children may show us their emotions in different ways such as difficulty sleeping, regression, changes in appetite, increase defiance, or difficulty separating from you. This can be frustrating for both children and adults. It is important to name the feelings that your child is experiencing. It can be helpful to say, "I know it is frustrating you can't see your friends!". Or "I know are worried about grandma and grandpa."

Be their safe place

"The brain functions optimally when it feels both safe and connected. Children need to know that life is going to be different and that you will find a new normal together. Make safety and connection your top priority, especially in the first days; you can always add academics, chores and such later. Notice whatever your child is doing and join in their play. Go outside and play. Get down on the floor and play. Wrestle. Giggle. Snuggle. Hug, high five and enjoy. Connection isn't just good for your mood; it builds neural connections in your child's brain and increases cooperation."²

Call our Warm Line at (303)245-4418 for additional support.

² Bailey, B. (2020). "COVID-19: Five helpful responses for families." *Conscious Discipline*.
https://consciousdiscipline.com/covid-19-five-helpful-responses-for-families/?mc_cid=89fc7c1740&mc_eid=7b2ae2409a