

Talking to Children and Youth about COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, children and youth may begin to experience anxiety and fear. They may also begin to worry about themselves, their family, and friends. This is a normal human reaction.

Global crises can be a source of childhood trauma and children and youth that have already experienced childhood trauma can be particularly anxious during a crisis. They may worry that they will not see loved ones due to illness or prolonged separation. They might worry that they could lose the stability of housing, food, or care.

Children and youth rely on trusted adults to ease their anxiety and fear during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Talking to them in a way that is honest and accurate can lessen their anxiety and help them make sense of what is happening around them. It is vital that DFPS caseworkers have developmentally appropriate conversations with the children they serve about COVID-19.

Below are some helpful suggestions for navigating conversations about COVID-19 with all children and youth, followed by specific advice for certain age groups. See [Resources and References](#) for sources of information and other helpful tips.

Find out what the child already knows

- **Start where the child is.** Find out what the child already knows – or thinks they know – and go from there.
- **Talk to children on a level appropriate for their age and development.** Ask questions in a manner that the child understands. Use language and interpreter services as necessary.
- **Follow the child's lead.** Some children may be super curious, and others may show little interest. Let the child guide the conversation. Pay attention to nonverbal cues to see if a child's apparent non-interest is hiding underlying anxiety.

Be open and honest

- **Stick to the truth.** Children can tell when adults are not being honest or telling the whole truth. Being truthful will help to build trust.
- **Stick to the facts.** Be sure to dispel misinformation. Go to trusted sources for correct and up-to-date info. Reliable sources include [DSHS](#) (HHSC), the [CDC](#), and [World Health Organization](#) (WHO).

- **It's OK if you don't know.** Even the doctors and scientists don't know everything about COVID-19. If you don't know the answer to a child's question, say so. Whenever possible, look up the information together, especially with older children. If you need time to research the information, get back to the child as soon as possible to follow up. This will not only help with the child's anxiety, it will also build trust.
- **Be calm.** Children are very perceptive. They will pick up on an adult's emotions and emotional cues. Speak calmly and keep your posture open even when you're talking over the phone.

Listen and be empathetic

- **Be willing to sit and listen** (even from the other side of a computer or phone). Allow enough time for this conversation and not rush things.
- **Let children express themselves.** Encourage the child to discuss their feelings about the situation. Do not dismiss their feelings – **validate their feelings**. Using "at least" statements is rarely helpful. See this [website](#) for more information.
- **Feelings are a natural reaction.** Worrying during a crisis is normal for everyone. Children can feel sad, angry, or afraid. For children in foster care, however, this will be heightened by removal and by separation from parents, extended family, siblings, and friends. Children's symptoms to COVID-19 are generally mild compared to the rest of the population and this information could help the child.
- **Connect to others.** If necessary, involve a therapist or trusted adult in this conversation. It may be a good idea to talk to siblings all at once, even if that means a conference call or multi-way video chat.

Health and prevention

- Talk to the child about germs and how they can keep themselves and others safe by washing their hands, covering their mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and staying away from others when they are sick.
- Demonstrating handwashing could be a fun activity for younger children, including toddlers, and even a good activity for preteens and youth. And yes, this can be done virtually! Take the virtual visit to the sink and practice proper hand hygiene together.

Information about specific age groups

Birth to Pre-school (Ages 0-4)

Babies and toddlers may become cranky or overly energetic during times of crisis. It is important to check in with caregivers about the child's and the

caregiver's stress levels. DFPS caseworkers can talk to toddlers about activities or changes in their regular routine.

For verbal children in this age group, you might say *"Coronavirus is a new virus that the world is still learning about. Doctors think that most people will be ok, especially kids, but some people might get very sick."*

It is important to remain calm and allow the child to guide the conversation when they are talking about their fears. If they have trouble communicating this to you, allow them to draw a picture.

Early Childhood (Ages 5-11)

Many children in this age group have had their schooling disrupted and are missing connections with their peers. Stability and routine are extremely important. Talk to children about what is different in their life and ask them how this makes them feel and how they think you could help. Children in foster care may be missing parent-child or sibling visits. Talk to the child about their feelings and about this.

Children at this age may share false information with one another which can increase anxiety. It is important for trusted adults to provide accurate and honest information during this time.

DFPS caseworkers can start a conversation by asking children what they already know about COVID-19. You might say *"Coronavirus is a new virus that the world is still learning about. The disease caused by this virus is called COVID-19. Doctors and scientists think that most people will be ok, especially kids, but some people might get very sick. Doctors and scientists are trying very hard to invent a medication to help people that are sick with coronavirus."*

Preteens and Teenagers (Ages 12-18)

Some preteens and teenagers may act out during a stressful event. Youth can also feel overwhelmed by their emotions and not want to talk about them. This may be a time of increased arguing and even fighting with siblings, parents, caregivers, or other adults.

This age group may struggle with having to miss out on socializing and lacking a sense of normalcy. It is important to have conversations with children in foster care about their fears regarding stability and major life changes.

DFPS caseworkers might say: *"Coronavirus is a new (novel) virus that the world is still learning about. The disease caused by the virus is called COVID-*

19. Doctors and scientists think that most people will be ok, but some people might get very sick. Doctors and scientists are trying very hard to invent a medication to help people that are sick with COVID-19. You might have heard about 'social distancing.' This means that in the meantime, we can all do our part by staying at home so that the virus does not get other people sick."

Young Adults (Ages 18-21)

Older youth (young adults) in DFPS foster care may have very specific needs during this time. They are already in a period of huge life transition and the COVID-19 pandemic may cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for this age group.

DFPS caseworkers should talk to them about how COVID-19 is impacting their income, housing, and education. Ask them how DFPS can support them during this time and if they need any essential supplies, including food, or any other type of support. DFPS staff should provide resources to older youth and caregivers.

DFPS caseworkers can start a conversation by asking young adults what they already know about COVID-19. DFPS caseworkers should also discuss social distancing, hygiene practices, and the importance of keeping themselves and their families safe.

Children with Disabilities Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities (IDD) or other Disabilities

Children with disabilities may have stronger reactions to a threatened or actual disaster. They might have more intense distress, worry, or anger than children without disabilities because they have less control over their day-to-day well-being than other children. This also may be true for children with other physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities. Children with disabilities may need extra words of reassurance and more explanations about COVID-19.

DFPS caseworkers should ensure that developmentally appropriate conversations are occurring with both children with disabilities and their caregivers. DFPS caseworkers should make certain that caregivers are able to meet the disabilities of the children in their care; this includes providing medical equipment and medication when necessary. DFPS should ask children, youth, and caregivers how DFPS can support them during this time and if they need any essential supplies, food, or any other type of support.

Resources and references

Additional information on talking to children and youth about COVID-19 and supporting them during the COVID-19 pandemic:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-disasters-and-other-traumatic-events/index.shtml>

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources>

<https://www.cwla.org/coronavirus/>

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/focus-areas/foster-care>

Adapted from:

“Coronavirus (COVID-19): How to Talk to Your Child (for Parents) - Nemours KidsHealth.” Edited by Jennifer Shroff Pendley, *KidsHealth*, The Nemours Foundation, Mar. 2020, kidshealth.org/en/parents/coronavirus-how-talk-child.html.

Russell, Wendy Thomas. “10 Tips for Talking about COVID-19 with Your Kids.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 16 Mar. 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/10-tips-for-talking-about-covid-19-with-your-kids>.