

# Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

The purpose of this document is to provide information to parents and caregivers to help them navigate this unique and challenging time. It is important to recognize that children will look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events - if parents seem overly worried, the anxiety of children may rise. At the same time, children need factual, age-appropriate information about the potential seriousness of the ongoing pandemic and concrete instruction on how to avoid infection and prevent spread of disease. Teaching children positive preventive measures and discussing their fears with them will provide children with a sense of control over the situation, which can aid in reducing anxiety.

## Specific Guidelines

### Remain Calm and Reassuring

- It's natural to feel anxious when faced with a threat. Our brain and body are designed with a fight, flight, freeze response, the purpose of which is to keep us safe by heightening our response to perceived danger.
- Children will react to and follow both your verbal and nonverbal reactions. Children will look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events.
- Remind children that you are there to keep them safe and healthy. Remind them of the efforts the government is taking to keep everyone, including children, safe and healthy.
- Understand that what looks like 'misbehaviours' in your children may be their response to stress and anxiety.
- Make time for children to talk about their concerns, fears, thoughts and questions. Remain calm and reassuring in your words and tone. Help them re-frame their thoughts and feelings based on safety, security and fact-based knowledge.
- Monitor and reflect on their responses and support self-care.



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## Monitor television viewing and social media

- Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet and through social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your children are present.
- Speak to your child about how stories about COVID-19 on the Internet may be based on rumours and inaccurate information.
- Talk to your child about factual information of this disease - this can help reduce anxiety.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety - avoid this.
- Be aware that developmentally inappropriate information (i.e., information designed for adults) can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.
- Aim to engage your child in games or other interesting activities.

## Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible

- Keep to a regular schedule while respecting safety and social distancing, as this can be reassuring and promotes physical health and well-being.
- Encourage your children to keep up with learning activities that you can do at home.
- Visit Grand Erie's website for updates and information.
- Create a designated quiet space in your home for your children and youth to do school work.
- Create a family schedule and 'to do' lists with your children, including jobs around the home (e.g., organizing cupboards), tasks for your children to complete (e.g., sorting toys, clothes, belongings), and fun activities (e.g., board games, movies, walks, video games)
- Encourage social connection with extended family and close friends through technology - video, phone calls, texting.

## Be honest and accurate

- In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- It's important to not ignore their concerns, but instead emphasize the actions you are taking to keep them safe and the steps taken by the government to keep people healthy and reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Children can be told this disease is thought to spread between people with COVID-19 who are in close contact with others - when an infected individual coughs or sneezes.
- It is believed that COVID-19 can be spread when you touch an infected surface or object, which is why it is important to maintain strong hand hygiene and aim to avoid touching your face, in particular the eyes, nose, and mouth.
- **Listen and validate their concerns**

- Early elementary school children need clear and concise information that should balance facts about COVID-19 with appropriate reassurances that their homes are safe and that adults are there to take care of them. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as, “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”
- Older elementary school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumour. Discuss the efforts made by school, community and government leaders to prevent COVID-19 from spreading.
- Secondary school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them gain a greater sense of control.

## Know the symptoms of COVID-19

- These symptoms appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the virus, or as long as 14 days after exposure:
  - Fever
  - Cough
  - Shortness of breath
- For some people, they may present with no symptoms at all; for others, they are quite severe or even life threatening. In either case it is important to check with your child’s healthcare provider and follow instructions about staying home and away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

## Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices

- Encourage your child to practice everyday good hygiene - simple steps to prevent the spread of illness:
  - Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds).
  - Cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow. Do not share food or drinks.
  - Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
  - Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over disease spread and will help to reduce their anxiety.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off any illness.

## Personal Self-Care:

- Take care of yourself. Not just for your own well-being, but also for the well-being of those you care for and support.
- Take time to eat and hydrate as this sometimes gets missed when we are caring for others.
- Aim for everyone to get 7-9 hours of sleep a night. Getting enough sleep helps everyone cope with the stresses of life.
- Build physical activity into your routine. It increases energy, boosts the immune system, reduces insomnia, and even acts as an antidepressant.
- Supportive relationships help us cope during difficult times. To reduce social isolation, use digital platforms and chatlines to talk to family and friends.
- Model personal self-care to help those around you establish and understand the essential role it plays in our overall wellness.

Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists and School Mental Health Ontario.

## Community Counselling Resources

Many of the community agencies are closed but continue to offer crisis counselling telephone and teleconference support.

These are some of the crisis supports available by phone:

- **St. Leonard's Crisis Response:** 519 759-7188 or 1-866-811-7188
- **H-N REACH Crisis:** 1-866-327-3224
- **H-N C.A.S.T (16 years and older):** 1-866-487-2278
- **Six Nations Crisis:** 1-866-445-2204 or 519-445-2207
- **Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-688-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

## Websites for Further Information

- **Public Health Agency of Canada**  
Risk level for Canadians, current situation, travel advisories
- **Ontario Ministry of Health**  
Ontario news, status of cases in Ontario – updated at 10:30 a.m. daily
- **World Health Organization**  
Technical documents, questions and answers
- **National Association of School Psychologists:**  
Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus): A Parent Resource
- **Kids help phone:**  
[www.kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus)



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**Telephone:** 519-756-6301 | **Toll Free:** 1-888-548-8878

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