

Talking to Kids About COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Talking to kids about sensitive world events like COVID-19 (Coronavirus) can be difficult. We want them to understand what's happening around them, but we also want to reassure them and avoid unrealistic fears or anxieties.

In particular, Mercy Family Counseling's Dr. Scott Eilers says adults may tend to gravitate toward two different ends of the spectrum when trying to navigate this balance: invalidating and catastrophizing.

Validate and Reassure

Invalidating involves using logic, comparisons or other facts to try and "explain away" a feeling. This includes telling someone that an event is unlikely to affect them, so they shouldn't be worried about it at all.

However, emotions and logic come from different parts of the brain, which is how we can understand that something is unlikely to happen to us while still feeling scared of it. When we tell kids -- either directly or indirectly -- that they shouldn't feel a certain way, we run the risk of inadvertently teaching them to hide their feelings from us, or increasing their anxiety because they think they're the only ones worried about something. Instead, reassure children while validating their feelings. For example, "It's okay that you feel scared about this, just remember that there's a very low chance of this affecting us."

Prepare Don't Overwhelm

On the other hand, catastrophizing involves imagining the worst-case scenario and then focusing on it so much that you convince yourself it's likely to happen. You may then begin to experience emotions associated with it and may even start to prepare for it.

As humans, we have a survival response to prepare for the worst possible outcome, but we also need to keep the big picture in mind. For instance, if we tell our children one thing, but our actions demonstrate something different, we send a confusing and possibly stress-inducing mixed message. To avoid catastrophizing, ask yourself what the most likely outcome of this scenario will be. Then, focus primarily on preparing for that outcome, rather than focusing on the possibility that scares you the most.

If necessary, feel free to contact Mercy Family Counseling at (319) 398-6575 for additional assistance.