

Tips to help your kids understand the COVID-19 pandemic

Enlarge / “Why do we have to sing ‘Happy Birthday,’ Mom?” “We don’t, we can sing something else.” “OK! Let it go, let it goooooo...”

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Basically everyone is some kind of mess right now, as the world seemingly runs away from us in the midst of a confusing, life-altering pandemic. We adults at least can look for solid, up-to-date facts and use our phones and other devices to stay in touch with friends, family, and co-workers near and far in our need to understand this chaotic new world.

But young kids—utterly robbed of schools, daycares, extended family, and even parks and playgrounds—are seeing their lives arguably even more upturned than their parents’ lives have been. We as their caretakers can do our best to build new routines and schedules, stick to healthy habits, and to maintain their mental health along with our own, but one of the hardest things to grapple with right now is every small child’s favorite question: “Why?”

Even the best-prepared parent may be faltering on that one when it comes to preschool and lower elementary-aged students. “I, like many others here, have a small child (kindergartener, to be exact) that has had life upended by school closings and

shut-in laws,” one Ars reader recently wrote in a comment. “I’ve been trying to explain to her the virus, and she’s smart—she gets the gist of it—but I’m not finding a good ‘kid’ way to explain all the details (the social distancing, the testing, etc). She’s a Girl Scout, and they’re doing great badges for learning the virus and all we’re doing, but as a 5-year-old, I’m having trouble with her ‘getting’ it all.”

My 6-year-old daughter is a Girl Scout, too, and the last meeting her Daisy troop had this year—two days after what turned out to be their last day of first grade, months ahead of schedule—was a video conference with a registered nurse. The RN, aunt to one of our girls, talked to them all about hand-washing and how not to spread disease. Every kid present, including my daughter, understood her just fine and understood in the moment why they wouldn’t be returning to school the next day.

The weeks since, though, have grown increasingly peppered with her frustrations: “Why aren’t we going back to school?” “Why can’t my friend come over?” “Why can’t we go to the beach in June?” And perhaps most poignantly: “Why won’t the stupid coronavirus just *go away*?”

Q and A

The guidance for parents in the modern era—for any topic—is to help your kids by answering their questions fully when they ask them, in an age-appropriate way, but without explaining too much.

It’s a tricky line to walk. Many of us spend months or years priming ourselves to handle some of the inevitable biggies (“Where do babies come from?”) from the time our toddlers start talking. Even among the most foresightful and forthright of parents, though, almost nobody had a mental script on hand for something like this.

Happily for the Ars reader above, for me, and for all the millions of other parents right now struggling with our pint-sized family members, lots of experts are out there trying to help us provide the answers.

Global organizations, including UNICEF and the World Health Organization, have prepared simple lists of Frequently Asked Questions parents can use to look up the answers to their kids' questions about what COVID-19 is, where it came from, and what you can do about it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also have a landing page for parents trying to guide their children through the crisis.

Unsurprisingly for those of us old enough to have been raised on a steady broadcast diet of *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* in decades past, modern-day PBS resources are also mobilizing to help.

The PBS website has a guide for parents not so much explaining what specifically to say about the disease, but rather how to say it: with factual information, reassurance, and compassion. Meet the Helpers, which is run by central Florida PBS affiliate WUCF, has a page dedicated to meeting the coronavirus helpers. Short videos, about a minute long each, introduce a variety of concepts in easy-to-parse, kid-friendly ways.

The videos not only include explanations about social distancing and hand-washing but also introductions to a doctor and an epidemiologist who explain their roles to young audiences.

[embedded content]

Solid science

Explaining why we shouldn't sneeze in other people's faces is the easier half of the equation. (At least, in theory. Kids

under three are adorable but so extraordinarily gross.) Explaining the actual science of viral contagion and the human immune system is a bit trickier.

For school-age kids who can read, or for parents who would like something already in simple, kid-friendly terms to read aloud, National Geographic Kids has a dedicated page explaining the basics of the novel coronavirus. The site also has a glossary of terms available, which can help parents cover the basics like, “But what is a virus?” or “Why is this one called COVID-19? Are there 19 of them?”

Walls of text, however, are not the most appealing learning tools, so it’s a good thing we live in a world where singing cartoons exist.

Animated Netflix series *Ask the StoryBots* tackles kids’ science questions in a half-hour format. (It also inherited the sensibility of *Sesame Street* from the 1970s and 1980s, containing guest-star appearances and sketches that are much funnier to the parents in the room than to the kids.) One episode from the second season that explains what a virus is, how one travels, and how the immune system fights it off is now free on YouTube for all viewers, and it’s a great place to start.

[embedded content]

The known unknowns

Kids don’t learn things in a straight line but, instead, in a way more like a spiral. They’ll ask questions, drop a topic, and then return to it unexpectedly, with a deeper reading, hours or days or even weeks later. Odds are, you’ll find yourself answering similar questions time and time again, no matter how well or how poorly your child seemed to understand what you were saying the first time.

In the end, it's OK not to have all the answers. Looking something up together with your kids is great, because you can help teach them how to find trusted resources and look for an answer when they're stumped, too.

Many of the questions a kid might be asking right now don't have clear answers, though, and it's OK to be honest about that: yes, we can watch the *Storybots* about the immune system again. Yes, I can explain to you one theory why older people who catch it get sicker than kids who catch it do. No, we don't know when the playground will be open again or if you'll be able to go to summer camp; that will all depend on when the scientists say it's safe.

The hardest questions are the ones we adults, too, have been asking each other without good answers: are there enough tests? Do they work? Will experimental treatments or drugs work? And can we beat this thing, or is it here to stay? To those, we can only take to heart the answer we give our children: we'll have to wait and see.

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