

HOW TO TELL CHILDREN THAT THEIR LOVED ONE HAS CORONAVIRUS?

SHOULD I TELL THEM?

Even though we may try to protect small children from worries, they will **notice** that something is happening anyway – especially if someone in the family is infected. So you should rather be **honest** and **explain** the situation to the kid in a way appropriate for their age. Below you can find some ways how to do it.

WHEN TO TELL YOUR CHILDREN?

Speak with them **as soon as possible**. They can see something is happening but they don't know what it is. If you were keeping the situation secret from them before, you can still tell them, for example like this:

“We love you very much and we didn't want you to worry. But I can see that you do worry, so you should know what is going on...”

PUT ON YOUR OXYGEN MASK FIRST

If someone dear to you got infected, the situation is probably not easy for you. If possible, don't try to handle it alone. Before you speak to the kids, make sure you have some space to deal with the situation yourself. If you are not sure, don't be ashamed to get help from a professional who will guide you through the situation. Many of them offer their services for free these days. Think about the way you will speak to your child, try to anticipate their questions and get ready for them.

CALM PARENT – CALM CHILD

A child is calm **when their parents are**. Don't forget to **attend to your own needs** such as sleeping, talking it through and crying. Don't be ashamed to let your child know that you will **take a moment for yourself**; teach them instead that you do need one:

“I will take a look at what you want to show me when I finish drinking the tea.”

A DIFFICULT SITUATION FOR EVERYONE

Even the youngest member of the family can feel that something is not right. The following behaviours can tell you that your child is **stressed** and needs your help. However, pay attention especially to **behaviours which are not typical** for your child but have now appeared and are persisting.

HOW DO I RECOGNIZE THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING?

INFANTS

NEW PERSISTING BEHAVIOURS:

Troubles with feeding, calming down and sleeping.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Try to stick to the **daily routine** your child is used to. Differences and changes can show your child that something is happening.

Take turns caring for your child and **allow yourself some space** to calm down, don't forget to eat and sleep.

Don't be ashamed to **ask for help** with shopping or cooking, **call** your friends regularly. Seek out a **psychologist**, many of them now offer their services online.

TODDLERS

NEW PERSISTING BEHAVIOURS:

Regression to behaviour from a **younger age**, for example wetting themselves, wanting to be held or fed more often. The child can be **withdrawn**, temper **tantrums** may appear. While tantrums are common in toddlers, the **change** may manifest in atypical or more frequent tantrums or adversely in their visible and sudden decrease as **compared to the usual state**.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Try to keep the **daily routine**. Don't forget the **daily rituals** – activities happening when your child wakes up, eats, goes to sleep, when playtime is over.

You can **postpone** the tasks which are **difficult** for your child – such as potty training or sleeping in their own room – to a more peaceful time.

Be there for your child, try to distract them by playing with them.

You can **tell** your child what is happening in an appropriate way, and together come up with ways in which **they can participate**. They can for example **say hello** to a sick relative when you call this relative, **create something** for them with your help or **take a photo** with you for them.

“I am a little sad now because your aunt is very sick but I believe that the doctors can help her. Right now I can't tell you if she will get better - but I very much hope so!”

HOW DO I RECOGNIZE THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING?

PRESCHOOLERS

NEW PERSISTING BEHAVIOURS:

Unusually quiet or **withdrawn** behaviour or, adversely, uncommon aggression. Restlessness or inattention.

Visible **loss of independence** (the child for example wants to sleep in the same bed with you again) or, adversely, remarkably **adult behaviours**.

Fears or **self-accusation** of the child claiming that the infection is their fault (for example because of their illness or disobedience).

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Adjust the explanation according to their abilities but **be honest** and tell them about the situation.

“See, grandma has caught the illness that we now often talk about – the coronavirus. We can’t visit her right now, but she will definitely be very happy if we call her or you draw something for her.”

Don’t make any promises that you can’t keep for sure. **Don’t scare** your child but be honest.

„The illness has many different symptoms, so right now no one knows what exactly will happen in grandma’s case. She may recover soon, but maybe she will have to go to hospital.”

Name the illness and **explain** how it may manifest. Including the fact that not all coughing means coronavirus.

“Yes, people with coronavirus cough. But you coughing once right now doesn’t mean you caught it. Most probably something just tickled your throat.”

Let them ask questions, help them **describe the feelings** they might have but don’t know how to call them. If you fear that your child hasn’t understood what you are saying, you can **return to the discussion later**. Explain that such things **sometimes happen** and are nobody’s fault.

Don’t be surprised if they want to **play** games reflecting the coronavirus epidemic. Playing can help them **deal** with the situation. However, don’t let them **panic**; bring some order even to their worries.

“I know that you are worried. But we called Grandma yesterday and we are going to call her again tonight. We can’t ask her if she is all right ten times a day. But we can think through what we are going to talk about with her in the evening.”

Help them **understand** some atypical things they can observe you doing.

“We are now also watching the news at noon with your Dad. We do it because of coronavirus, the new illness, so that we know as much as we can about it and can best protect ourselves and you.”

HOW DO I RECOGNIZE THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING?

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

NEW PERISTING BEHAVIOURS:

Stress caused by the change in daily routine, the absence of school and friends.

Changes in behaviour, for example being unusually withdrawn and sad, but can also be bored and irritated.

Problems with concentration, slower comprehension or more frequent mistakes while learning.

Noticeable disobedience, regression to behaviours from a younger age or, adversely, overly responsible behaviour.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

In some way, keep a predictable schedule, define when to do school work, when to play, and when to take time to have a rest from each other's presence and private space for each of you.

Don't be too strict on yourself and your child while studying. You don't have to substitute the teacher and the whole class. Don't be too alarmed if your progress is slow. The home environment and stressful situation may have a significant influence on your child's attention span. Use the ready-made programs.

Explain the hygiene measures and the reasons behind them.

"You can't go to school right now or play with your friends outside, because even though you may be safe, someone vulnerable could get ill. We want to be considerate to others so that we get past coronavirus soon and can do everything like before."

When dealing with the general measures as well as with an infected relative, let your child take initiative. Give them some task for "the grownups". Can they be a keeper of your household hygiene measures? To think of something that can be done for the sick relative whom you can't visit now?

If you for example sew facemasks, let you child help you choose fabric designs or the colour of the thread. By doing this, you will give them an opportunity to participate in the current situation and make their voice heard.

Don't let them be alone with their fears. Maybe they will not tell you about those fears themselves, but if you sense that something may be different, try to ask and find out. Be understanding about their emotions, maybe you share similar ones.

"Of course I am also sad because Grandpa is sick. I understand that you are afraid, sometimes I am afraid, too."

PREPARE FOR YOUR CHILD'S QUESTIONS

The questions asked by children can be painfully direct and demand answers. Be prepared that the child may ask difficult questions, and try think of a true but soothing answer ahead of time. We have prepared some typical questions that can come up when a relative is ill, and some ways how to answer them.

IS IT MY FAULT THAT THEY ARE ILL?

You may find this question irrational but it is important to straighten it out. Especially preschoolers have a tendency to blame themselves for difficult situations in the family and could ask you such question. They may view the infection for example as a consequence of them acting up or disobeying the relative.

“You don't have to blame yourself, it is not your fault that Aunt is sick. There are many ways to catch the virus, maybe she was on the bus next to someone who didn't know they were infected, and caught it from this person.”

A situation may occur when someone got infected from the child and the child knows it. There is no use in denying the fact but it is important to be clear with the child that they didn't want to infect anyone deliberately so they don't have anything to blame themselves for.

“You don't have to blame yourself for this, you definitely didn't want to infect anyone. Some people transmit the illness but they are not sick themselves. None from us knew that you have the virus.”

CAN I OR SOMEONE AROUND ME GET INFECTED?

Again, be honest and if it can potentially happen, don't tell your child otherwise. However, calm them down and tell them that you are doing everything you can so that no one gets sick. Describe the measures that affect your child and teach them what they can themselves do for their own protection. Lead by example.

“I can't promise that none from us get infected. But we are all trying to protect ourselves and you. That's why you are not going to kindergarten and we are not going anywhere by bus. You can make sure yourself that we all wash our hands just like we learn it, and that we wear a facemask when going outside.”

“We wear these facemasks so that we don't get infected. Normally, only the doctors and our dentist wear them but you don't have to be scared of them. Facemasks protect everyone from spreading the coronavirus, that's why everyone has to wear them. We are protecting others by wearing facemasks, and they are protecting us.”

WILL THEY DIE?

Although this is maybe the toughest question that your child can ask you, it can happen and it is your job to be prepared to answer.

Again, it is no use to promise the child that their relative will recover in a few days if you doubt that yourselves. But you can assure your child that even though some people have already died of coronavirus, your relative is doing their best to get better.

“See, the illness can be very different case to case. Many people were only coughing and nothing worse happened to them but a few people really died of coronavirus. I know you are scared and I am too. But I believe that the doctors who are taking care of Grandma are doing everything for her to get better.”