

## HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD OVERCOME THE FEAR OF CORONAVIRUS

The emergency measures, as well as the epidemic itself, will end one day. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean that all of children's fears will go away too. Some children will still be processing the difficult situation and it is possible that the fear of the virus will stay with the child even after the outbreak is contained. That can happen even under less dramatic circumstances, for example when they see a monster in a movie. After a long epidemic, they might be afraid to enter public transport and to go to crowded places; they might start avoiding people with a cold or wash their hands anxiously over and over again.

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"A child's fear seems to make the parents afraid as well. It gives them bad conscience and unpleasant feelings. The child's anxieties make them wonder why it is their child that is showing fear."  
Jan-Uwe Rogge, family counselor

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**How to help children whose fears are persisting?**

### **DON'T PUNISH THE CHILD.**


For example when they don't want to enter public transportation, the reason preventing them from doing so is fear, not disobedience.

### **DON'T TRY TO DISPROVE YOUR CHILD'S FEARS AND DON'T DOWNPLAY THEM.**

Don't tell your child that there is nothing to worry about outside anymore. The child could then feel betrayed and lonely with the fears which, for them, feel very real. Statements such as "You don't have to worry!" or "Things are not that bad!" are not helping the child; on the contrary, they might make them feel helpless. They could also somehow get infected and consequently stop trusting you.

### **LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD AND SHOW UNDERSTANDING.**

Tell them that you understand their fears because during the epidemic we really needed to be very careful. You can put it in the following way:

 "We must listen to the hygienists and doctors whose job it is to tell us what is and what isn't safe. And right now they are telling us that going outside, going to school and visiting friends is safe, so let's listen to them. Just like we listened to them when they told us that it wasn't safe."

## YOU ARE A ROLE MODEL FOR YOUR CHILD.

This includes overcoming fears.

If you express serious concerns about the cleanliness of public transport, your child will probably also be scared of them. Public spaces may be dirty, but the child needs to be able to move through them without the fear of getting ill.

However, it is normal that when the pandemic ends, we will need some time to get used to the fact that we are not in immediate danger anymore. All of us will have to learn to function normally again. You can say to your child:

“It is a bit weird for me too to go outside without any fears. But we know that we can do that now, so we must learn to do the things we did before. At first, we will probably be more careful, but as time goes on, we will get used to not being afraid anymore.”

## HELP YOUR CHILD NOTICE THEIR FEARS AND FIND A WAY TO OVERCOME THEM.

Living in constant fear is a burden for the body.

You can say to your child:

“When you get on the tram, you might get a little scared. Remember that I told you it could happen. Find a place that looks cleaner to you than the other ones or hold the handhold with one hand only which you will wash once you get home or to school. This way, you can stay clean. You will also have hand sanitizing gel in your backpack, but use it only if it is really necessary – for example if you can’t wash your hands anywhere close.”

Tell your child to only use the hand sanitizer in the direst of circumstances so that they don’t get used to sanitizing their hands too often and become obsessed.

## SPEAK WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE FEAR, DON’T DISTRACT THEM FROM IT.

There will come a time when they will have to face their fear, and you should be their guide. For example when a scared child doesn’t want to play with their friend who is sneezing, you can ask them:

“You are scared that he has this ugly coronavirus, right? But I think that he probably has a tickle in his nose or a cold. You can play with him, but let’s tell him to sneeze into a tissue, all right?”

Naming the fear can help your child understand what they are in fact feeling, and you can then show them how to overcome it. Trying not to avoid your feelings is more efficient than suppressing them. It is necessary to normalize these feelings and process them.

## PROVIDE YOUR CHILD WITH A SPECIFIC SOLUTION.

Your child should know that the disease manifests differently in different cases and for children it is usually the least dangerous. For most people, especially children, catching this disease is not life threatening. The overall health state of the person also plays an important role. The child can therefore protect themselves by continuing to wash their hands before every meal and when they come back from outside. Vitamins that protect the body from diseases are also beneficial.

It is also important to explain to the child that the COVID-19 is a mutation of coronaviruses which are common and not that dangerous. It is possible that they will hear about the less dangerous ones at some point and could be scared if they didn't know that they differ from COVID-19. You can say to your child:

"There are several kinds of coronaviruses in the world, and most of them only cause common unpleasant issues such as a cold in the autumn and spring. Dogs and cats can sometimes suffer from coronaviruses but the vet can help them. However, there is a small group of coronaviruses that is different than the others. And we had one of those here. This more dangerous coronavirus is called SARS-CoV-2 (or COVID-19). It doesn't cause a cold but rather a fever and problems with breathing. And only people can get it, not animals. So if you catch a cold and you hear somewhere that it is caused by a coronavirus, it is not the dangerous one we were hiding from."



The symptoms of COVID-19 may overlap with the symptoms of other diseases or issues (such as asthma). If your child regularly has fevers or breathing problems, assure them they most probably has nothing to do with COVID-19.



## NORMALIZE COMMON SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESSES.

It is normal that you blow your nose during the day – for example when you are coming from a cold environment to a warm place. You can help your child accept an occasional running nose as something normal, for example by saying:

"Oh, it is so warm here that my nose defrosted really fast, so I need to blow it. Your nose may also be defrosting; don't you need to do it, too?"

## TOGETHER WITH YOUR CHILD, FRAME THE EVENT OF THE EPIDEMIC.

You should give it firm boundaries in time – for example, you can mark the time when it appeared in the Czech Republic in the calendar together, and, importantly, mark the day when it was officially stated that everyone is cured, the epidemic is over in the Czech Republic and we are not in such danger anymore. Don't tell your child that the disease will never return but assure them that the hygienists monitor its appearance. The hygienists and doctors will let us know in case of danger. And Mom and Dad will then make sure that the child behaves in a way that will keep them safe.

## INTRODUCE THE SAME ROUTINE AS BEFORE THE EPIDEMIC.

Help your children get back into the usual routine with the help of something they like – for example leisure activities. Start bringing them to extracurricular classes again. If they like the activity, it will lift up their spirits.

## **YOU CAN PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR THE SITUATION THAT SCARES THEM.**

You can even do it in the safe space of your home through play. You can act out a scene with several characters (for example plush toys which the child can help choose and give them specific roles). You can include Mr. Hygienist who will perform various measurements and declare that the corona virus is not spreading anymore. He will therefore allow you to go out, use public transport, go to school and visit others. He will, however, recommend you not to forget the basic habits you learned such as washing your hands, eating fruits and vegetables and having enough exercise these things are good for your health at any time. Then you can act out with your child how the characters (representing a parent and a child) could behave for example when travelling by public transport. If the child doesn't want their character to get on public transport, you can remind them that Mr. Hygienist, who understands the coronavirus, has already permitted it because there is no significant danger anymore. During the game can also remind them that it is possible to hold on to anything, but you shouldn't do things like pressing your face against the window, and at home you must wash your hands.

With the help of this activity, the child can get ready for the potential anxiety they may feel when they have to enter a tram, and try to process it in a safe environment. Most importantly, though, they will know what awaits them. It is good for the parent to discuss with the child before the journey what they are going to do – that they are going to go by tram, go shopping and visit Grandma afterwards. The child will be able to imagine this and may also signal to their parent if any of those things give them anxiety.

## **SPEAK WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE EPIDEMIC EVEN DURING ITS COURSE.**

Even during the epidemic, you can mitigate the possible anxiety of your child. Speak with them about current events but do it in a soothing way. The child should know that the disease usually has a very mild course – especially in children and their parents. People often feel better than when they have the flu. We are so scared of this disease and try to avoid it because we don't really know it. And for elderly people and those who have other diseases as well it can be dangerous, so we need to be careful not to infect them. Once the situation starts getting better, tell them so – inform them for example that the numbers of newly infected people have started decreasing and people are recovering, that soon their school and even the cinemas will be open again because it will be safe to do so like it was before the disease appeared. Or that we probably won't find an efficient cure for some time yet but the scientists are working on it and it is therefore possible that we will eventually have a vaccine.

## **IT WOULD BE GREAT IF YOU COULD HELP YOUR CHILD WITH THEIR ANXIETIES YOURSELF.**

If the issues your child has been experiencing persist for several weeks and you don't know what to do anymore, you can seek out a psychologist who will advise you on how to proceed. You can then continue working with your child yourself according to this advice. If you are the one who helps your child efficiently, this will mean the best possible outcome for your relationship – that's why it is worth trying. If it's not possible and your child's situation doesn't improve, visit the psychologist together. If your child already goes to school, the school psychologist will surely also be of help. The psychologist can also let you know how the child's fears and anxieties concerning the disease manifest at school where you can't be with them.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reassure your child that their feelings are valid, and that you understand that they are still afraid.
2. Speak with your child about their fears so that they don't feel weird or alone with those fears.
3. Give your child accurate information about their fears (they can often be irrational and based on misinterpretation or disinformation).
4. Support your child's efforts to manage their fears.
5. Reward even the slightest demonstration of courage.



"Give your child the feeling of safety and security. Trust them that they will overcome their fears. The more secure the child feels, the more confidence they will have in their own abilities. It is important to take children's fears seriously – neither to underestimate, nor dramatize them too much. It is important to actively listen to your child, show your compassion and understanding, but above all not to solve the problem for your child. The fears come fast but can sometimes take their time to disappear. It is impossible to overcome them overnight. Each child has their own pace, their own methods."



Jan-Uwe Rogge, a quote from the book *Dětské strachy a úzkosti* (Children's Fears and Anxieties)

This leaflet was created by postgraduate students as part of the curriculum at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, under the supervision of Zuzana Masopustová, Ph.D., and it is meant to be widely distributed free of charge.

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