

Being a Helper Hero while parenting through Covid-19

There are tons of resources now available with recommendations on how to talk with children about the novel coronavirus and Covid-19 (see Resource List on page 4). Many of these have helpful words to explain why kids shouldn't hug their grandparents or can't go to school right now. Some of them talk about looking for the helpers. But many of you parents are also the helpers and continuing your work exposes you—and your children—to the risk of infection. Some of you are asking what decisions to make about self-isolating away from your children and how to share your decisions with them. Though the decisions about where you stay, who your children stay with, and what types of contact you have are yours to make and are dependent on many factors, there is developmental information that can guide your choices and support conversations about these with your children.

TALK ABOUT IT:

Start a conversation. Kids are listening all around them, learning constantly and filling in gaps, often in unhelpful and inaccurate ways. Talking together will help reduce their worries and feel more connected and supported. Begin by asking your child what they have already heard about the novel coronavirus and Covid-19. Listen quietly and patiently. Then correct any inaccurate information they have. Ask what other questions they have. Some key points to share:

- ◆ We're learning more each day but we know this will not last forever.
- ◆ Most people who get sick get better.
- ◆ There are ways we can protect ourselves. Washing hands, keeping lots of physical distance, staying home...these are all ways kids and grownups can help stay healthy and help be a germ-buster.
- ◆ There are lots of grownups who are working hard to fight the virus and there are lots of grownups who are helping to keep us all safe in the meantime. Talk about these roles—grocery store clerks, mail delivery persons, nurses, pharmacists, ambulance drivers, doctors, hospital cleaning crews...there are so many helpers. How is each one helping?

Ask what your child knows about your work. Share with them what you are doing as a helper hero. Keep it brief and simple. If your child looks worried, tell them how you keep yourself as safe as possible while working (eg. I clean the grocery conveyor belt in between each person; I wear a mask to protect from germs in the hospital; I wear a special outfit when I am in the lab trying to create a vaccine). If your child asks if you will get sick, keep it honest but optimistic. For example, "I don't know but I am doing everything I can to stay healthy. That's why I wear gloves at work." Do not promise what you can't, but it is important not to give kids scary ideas they haven't yet had. It is also very important to convey hope and confidence when you can.

SEPARATIONS:

Some of you are making the very difficult decision to physically separate yourself from your child or family in order to ensure that you don't infect them. Even with the youngest of babies, it is important to talk to them about this decision. Let them know what the plan is for where you will be and why, who will take care of them, and how you will keep in touch. The younger the child, the briefer, and the specifics will depend on you. Here is an example of how you might communicate these important messages. "Because Mommy is a nurse and Daddy is a doctor they both have a job to help sick people get better at the hospital. Mommy and Daddy are doing everything they can to help others and to stay healthy but coronavirus is a sneaky germ so Mommy and Daddy are going to take extra care to protect you. To keep you extra safe from the germ, Auntie Stef is going to take care of you at her house. Mommy and Daddy will not be able to give you snuggles for a while until the germs are gone but they will still love you so much all the time. You can draw pictures for them and put them in the mail. Daddy will read you stories on FaceTime. Mommy will see you across the street and wave and talk in extra loud outside voices from far away. Auntie Stef will brush your hair and play with you and keep you safe while Mommy and Daddy work as helpers. It will be hard for everyone but Mommy and Daddy will be so proud of you for helping be a germ-buster by keeping a safe distance and they will be so glad to give you hugs and kisses again when the germs are gone." (continued on next page)

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(separations continued)

Some of you have asked if it would be better to disappear entirely rather than see your child without physical proximity and touch. The answer is no. Stay connected as best you can. Be as emotionally and psychologically present as you can muster. Create rituals. If you can play dolls together through a glass door, do so! If you can FT a bedtime story, great! As schedules tighten, perhaps instead you can use the MarcoPolo app to leave a 30-second video message of you singing their favorite song or reading a short story. That can help you work around incompatible schedules, and it will let them watch you as many times as they want, while allowing you to rest before continuing your work. Rely on activities that show love and presence and connection and nurturance without requiring yourself to generate your own words when you are too exhausted.

ROUTINES, RITUALS, AND STRUCTURE:

Kids feel calmer (and behave better!) when they feel that the grownups are in charge and will keep them safe. Consistent rules and predictable routines are even more important now than ever because they facilitate the feeling that grownups are in charge and keep kids safe. That said, try to be gentle with yourself about the standards for implementing them. Sometimes a good routine for a kid means knowing that they will have breakfast after changing into clothes and that after dinner, they will brush their teeth before hearing a story in bed. If your child is now living with other caregivers or you are sleeping in a separate room, be creative about how you can maintain routines and rituals. Video chatting to read a bedtime story, leaving recorded video messages that someone else will share with them each morning when they wake...these can all help with consistency, predictability, and connection.

REACTIONS:

Amidst stress, it is normal for children—and adults—to demonstrate regression and to have a difficult time with big feelings. Try to be gentle and patient with yourself, your child, and others. It is hard to see children mad, sad, scared, and confused. When you can, ask how your child is feeling. Reflect back to your child just what you heard them say they feel. Validate it simply. For example, “you feel sad about not seeing your friends,” or “you are mad I have to go to work.” You might add, “I feel that way sometimes too,” or “I will miss you, too, but I will keep loving and thinking about you.” If your child is not able to tell you how they feel, reflect what you see: “you have a mad face about my not being able to hug you. I miss hugging you too, but I am so proud of you for keeping a safe distance to help protect from germs.”

You will also have your feelings. It is helpful for children not to see their caregivers out of control with intense feelings; that can be scary. Yet it is also creepy for children when grownups paste on a smile and say everything is great when it is clearly not. Instead of trying to hide your feelings, name them and explain them to your child. For example, “You’re noticing that Daddy has tears. He is crying because he is sad that people are sick. Even when Daddy feels sad, he still loves you and is glad to see you.” You could add, “It’s ok to feel sad and cry. Daddy will feel happy again later.”

When you feel playful or joyful or silly, find a way to share that with your child. Laugh together when you can.

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ANSWERING HARD QUESTIONS:

In the midst of deep emotion, sometimes it is helpful to have some words on hand to answer difficult questions kids might ask. Here are a few examples you could consider:

- ◆ If a child asks if you will get sick, you might say: “I hope not, but I don’t know. I do know I am doing everything I can to stay healthy. At work, I wear a special mask to protect me from germs....” Do not promise what you can’t, but it is also important not to give kids scary ideas they haven’t yet had, so only answer the precise questions they ask. It is also important to convey hope and confidence when you can.
- ◆ If a child asks if you will die: “Most people who get sick, get healthy again. It is rare to die from Covid-19 and I do not think that will happen to me. I am doing x, y, and z to stay healthy and protect from germs.”
- ◆ If a child asks when this will be over: “We don’t know. We are learning more every day. It won’t be forever. It will end.”
- ◆ If a child asks why you have to go, why you can’t just not help people who are sick: “I am a _____. It’s my job to help people who are sick, even when it is very hard to be a helper. Right now there are a lot of people who need help.”

Feel free to be in touch— mary.wise@duke.edu.

A Few Resources

To help guide your conversations:

- ◆ <https://preventchildabuse.org/coronavirus-resources/>
- ◆ <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus>
- ◆ https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf
- ◆ <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>
- ◆ <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-you-and-your-kids-can-de-stress-during-coronavirus>
- ◆ <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>

To read with your child:

- ◆ The book “You Weren’t With Me” by Chandra Ghosh Ippen, available on kindle as well as hardcopy: <https://smile.amazon.com/You-Werent-Me-Chandra-Ippen-ebook/dp/B07QX4J6DQ/ref=smi www rco2 go smi g8217842112? encoding=UTF8&%2AVersion%2A=1&%2Aentries%2A=0&ie=UTF8>
- ◆ The book “The Invisible String” by Patrice Parst
- ◆ <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/health/>
- ◆ <https://consciousdiscipline.com/resources/why-cant-i-go-to-school-social-story/>



For Leah and the other
young kids who have to be
brave alongside their
families.

My name is _____.

I can draw a picture of me and my family.

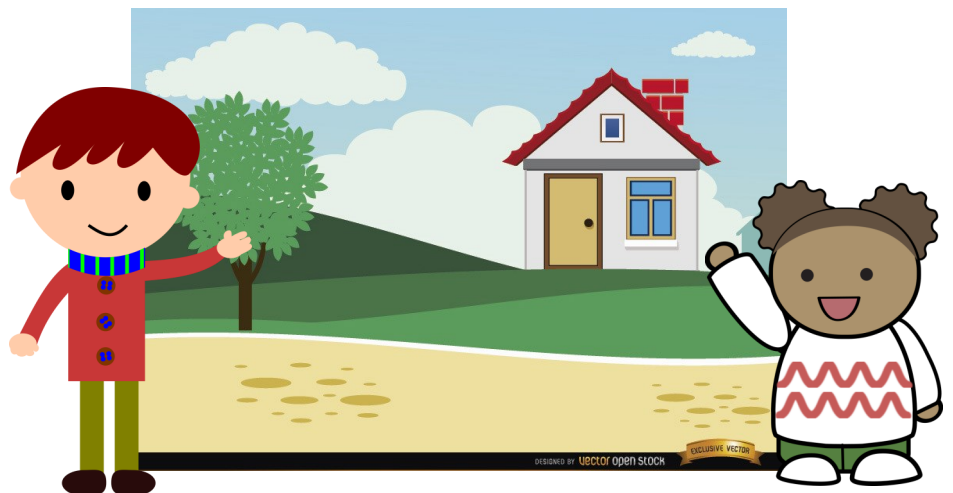
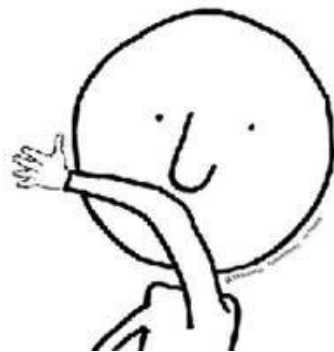
Most times, I live with my grownups. I call them

I can draw a picture of what it looks like when I am at home with my grownups.

I have learned a lot about the novel coronavirus. It is a germ that causes Covid-19. We can not see it with our eyes but scientists have shown us what it looks like.

I can draw a picture of it.

There are lots of ways to be a germ-buster and help stay safe from the coronavirus germ. I can circle the ways that I am helping to stay safe.



There are lots of helper grownups.



I can circle what kind of helper my grownup is.

While my grownup is being a helping hero, I will live with

This is because my grownup loves me so much they want to keep me safe from the coronavirus germs while they are working as a helping hero.

I can draw a picture of what it will look where I will live while I am not physically with my grownup.

I can also draw a picture of where my grownup will live while they are protecting me from germs.

This will not be forever.

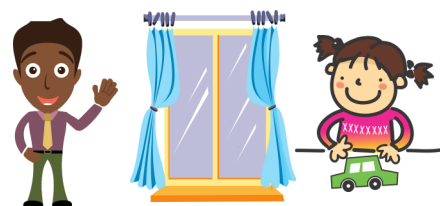
Everyone has lots of feelings. I can draw pictures of all the feelings I have about not living with my grownup while they are being a helping hero.

While my grownup and I live in different places, we can do special things to stay connected.



I can leave a phone message of me singing a song!

Maybe we can play toys through the glass door or on a video call!



I can watch a video of them reading me a story!



We can talk on videochat!



I can draw a picture to send in the mail!



I can also do special things for other helper heroes.

I can cheer out the window
when I see them!



I can draw a picture for them!



I can send a card!



I can say thank you!



Even when we are physically far apart, my grownup will love me and think about me lots.

When it is safe for us to be physically together again, I will get so many big hugs!

