

Well@Work Podcast

Episode 15: Talking to Children about COVID-19

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMSHA. On this episode of the podcast, Natalie Tate from the Center on Trauma and Children discusses how to talk to children about COVID-19.

Everyone has been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Our day-to-day lives have been turned upside down and children have had to adjust to a new normal in a short amount of time. Many children have had to transition to non-traditional instruction or online learning. They have had to isolate from friends, family, and other people that provide vital social support. They have had to adapt to new behavioral standards such as mask wearing and social distancing. And to overhear potentially devastating news on an almost daily basis. As healthcare and behavioral health professionals, it is important to promote open and honest conversation with our children, to understand how we can better support them, and ensure we answer their questions and address their concerns. Today, we will provide some tips for talking to our children about COVID-19, review common issues children may be facing, and discuss how to support them throughout this crisis.

Tip 1: Holding space. When initiating these conversations with children it is important to be fully present with them. Engage in active listening techniques to ensure they feel understood and heard, validate and normalize any emotions they express. This is important during any interaction with children, but is especially important to remember throughout conversations related to COVID-19. These basic tools can help support children while they adapt to changes and potential fears COVID-19 may bring up for them.

Tip 2: honesty and clarity. When answering your child's questions or discussing COVID-19, honesty and open communication are key. You want to focus on communicating any information you are sharing truthfully and clearly, but in a way that is still developmentally appropriate for your child. They may be receiving misinformation from others, so it is helpful to gently provide them with factual information in a non-judgmental way and equip them with knowledge about the situation.

Tip 3: safety. Discuss ways your child can engage in behavioral strategies that will promote their feelings of safety, these tips can help empower them in a situation that may feel out of their control. These can include general safety precautions such as proper hand washing, use of hand sanitizer, social distancing, and mask wearing. These are all tips most of us are already familiar with, but it is important to check in with our children and give them gentle reminders when needed. You may also want to explain to your children that the virus is tricky and while precautions limit the spread of the virus, it does not eliminate all risk. This can help them avoid blaming themselves or others if anyone tests positive for the virus. Children that test positive may worry that they did something wrong, may worry that others will blame them, or classmates will judge them, or worry people around them might even be angry with them. By explaining early on that the virus can infect anyone may ease some of these concerns. If they, or someone they know tests positive as well, avoid biases and stigma that some may associate with the virus.

Tip 4: socialization and stress. Changes in a child's normal day-to-day activities and loss of typical socialization can be stressful. If your family has not already brainstormed methods of providing your

children with social interaction in new and safe ways, it may be helpful to spend some time brainstorming together. Ask your child if they can come up with creative ways they can still be involved with their loved ones while still maintaining appropriate safety. You can discuss virtual get-togethers, online game nights, picnics at a local park, or identify hiking trails in the area. Other options may include filming and recording videos they can send to loved ones or even exchanging letters with a friend, family member, or pen pal. Mutually planned activities with a friend can also be a fun way for the child to stay connected and create shared experiences with that friend. You or another caregiver may be able to create a baking kit, science experiment, or art project that they and their friend can unpack at their respective homes and work on together via Zoom or another communication platform. These tools can help provide your child with vital socialization, while still following COVID-19 precautions.

Tip 5: create transitions and boundaries. Another factor that may be difficult for children is learning in the same environment they used to come home and relax or play in. You may want to investigate any tools you are already utilizing to separate school time from home time or suggest techniques they can implement to create firmer boundaries between work and play. Some examples of rituals that can help them transition may include playing their favorite song at the end of the school day, changing their clothes when they complete all of their schoolwork, or saving a special treat or snack for the end of class. These rituals can provide a physical distinction between school and home and ameliorate some of the difficulties that may come up for children that are learning in the same environment they live in.

Tip 6: general coping strategies. You can also talk to your child and identify useful coping mechanisms they have successfully relied upon in the past to manage their stress and help them apply those tools to their current situation. It may also be helpful to suggest new, developmentally appropriate strategies that may manage any stress related symptoms. They may find it comforting to work on an art project, return to a favorite video game, read a book, take a child friendly yoga class online, play music, or bake with other members of your household. Deep breathing, as long as it is not a potential trauma trigger, can assist with decreasing some of the physiological symptoms of stress. Grounding activities such as noticing objects in their environment, engaging all five of their senses, or identifying five colors they see around them can also help reduce feelings of stress in the moment. These are helpful in any stressful situation but can definitely be applied in times of COVID related stress.

Before we wrap up, it is important to note that this will be an ongoing conversation. Your child's thoughts and feelings related to COVID-19 and the changes they have experienced based on this crisis may change over time as they receive more information from other family members, teachers, the media, and other children. They may also experience COVID-19 burnout and need support and encouragement to continue engaging safety measures, social distancing, and other precautions. Take time to check in with your child about the impact COVID-19 may be having on them. Being present with them and validating their thoughts and feelings about the situation will go a long way in making them feel heard during this difficult time. For more tips check out our website at the address in the video description and remember to stay well at work. Thank you!

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.