

WHAT PARENTS AND TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

How to Talk  
to Children  
and Teens  
about...

COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

In this disturbing and frightening time, a virus that human beings have not seen before is now infecting millions of people all over the globe. The coronavirus (also known as COVID-19) causes serious illness and possible death in adults, teens, children, and infants. To prevent the spread of the virus, national and local health professionals and government leaders have taken unprecedented steps, such as closing schools; insisting that people practice “social distancing,” or maintaining at least six feet between one person and another; and encouraging people to stay home and—if they need to leave their homes—to wear masks in public. For people of faith, the closure of churches to congregants, especially during the holy seasons of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, seemed to be the harshest measure of all. Just when we need God and each other the most, we cannot gather as families of faith.

If this is difficult for adults to fathom, it is nearly impossible for children and teens to understand. Although they may have initially experienced joy at the

thought of time off from school, as the days go by, they wonder if they will ever see schoolmates or teachers again or if they will ever again get to play sports with their teammates. Many of these young people who had expected proms and graduation ceremonies to conclude their high school years realize that events they had so eagerly anticipated will not occur.

This booklet is meant to help you communicate about this worldwide tragedy to the children and teens in your life. Each chapter will focus on a different aspect of the pandemic, starting with background information suitable for adults and most teens, and followed by suggestions on how to talk about the chapter's information to young people of different ages.

- Chapter 1 will discuss some of the science behind this infection and why certain measures are recommended.
- Chapter 2 will focus on the various reactions that children, teens, and adults might demonstrate.
- Chapter 3 will reflect on why bad things happen and what role God plays in tragedies.

- Chapter 4 will offer suggestions for building resiliency in uncertain times. Age-appropriate activities will also be proposed to help children and teens explore their own reactions and to consider what they might be able to do for others during this time.

As people become ill and die, individuals lose their jobs, and stores and small businesses close, this pandemic has already wreaked havoc worldwide and will continue to do so until a cure, robust therapies to alleviate symptoms, or a vaccine are in place. These may be many months away, and we have to live in the present time. As adults, we can model positive behaviors to the young people in our care, even in the midst of our own uncertainty, fear, and suffering. This pandemic can be a time of emotional and spiritual growth for us all, but that will only happen if we choose growth rather than denial.

## CHAPTER 1

# Viruses, Pandemics, and Ways to Control Them

### **Background Information**

A virus is an infectious germ that is too tiny to be seen except with special microscopes. Depending on the virus, it may be made up of DNA or RNA, genetic material placed inside a protein layer. Viruses can only multiply when they are inside a host, that is, when they are inside the cells of a species (plant, animal, human) that will support their multiplication. In this, they are like hijackers ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550000/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550000/), “virus”). Hijackers don’t have the car or airplane until they take control of it; before that, they are only on the lookout for it. Once they find what they need, and take it, they’re in control. So, too, a virus. Once it finds its host, it begins to multiply and cause disease.

Scientists think there may be millions of viruses. Some cause disease in plants, animals, and people. Some viruses are more of a nuisance (like the virus causing the common cold), and some are deadly (like the virus causing AIDS). There are families of viruses, meaning that—just like siblings in a human family—different ones are related to each other genetically. Again, just like members of a human family, some viruses don't cause much trouble, while others in the family wreak havoc.

The coronavirus is an RNA virus that is so named because of the way it looks under the special microscope; “corona” means crown, and the virus has little spikes on its surface. There are at least seven different coronaviruses, and most only cause upper respiratory symptoms in the nose or throat. Three members of the family cause much more serious illness, and that includes the coronavirus causing the present pandemic. It is called COVID-19: “co” for corona, “vi” for virus, “d” for disease, and “19” for the year it was first described. It was first found in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, and it is thought to have originated from a bat virus that mutated (or changed) so as to be able to infect human beings. Because it is a new or novel virus, medical science was not familiar with it. Thus, there is currently no cure or vaccine.

When a disease is localized to a very small area, it is

called an outbreak. For example, a school might experience an outbreak of chicken pox. When the area is larger, it is called an epidemic; “epi” means upon, and “demic” refers to people or district. When the area is very large, or worldwide, it is called pandemic; “pan” means all, so it is upon all the people or districts. The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 situation a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Coronaviruses cause respiratory illnesses, which means they are generally spread by person-to-person contact, especially through being around the sneezes and coughs of infected persons. Each sneeze and cough sends out both tiny and larger droplets that contain the virus. These droplets can land on another person or on a nonliving surface. If a person touches anything that the droplets have recently landed on, and then touches his or her nose, eyes, or mouth, the virus then enters that person’s body; it has found a new host. Since it is a novel virus, no one has immunity to it, so anyone can then get sick if they come into contact with the droplets.

It would be great if we could know who had the coronavirus by their symptoms. We could just stay away from those who are coughing and sneezing a lot, and we would all be safe. For reasons we do not understand, however, some people infected with this coronavirus

have no symptoms at all, and others are only mildly ill. Yet some people get very ill and die. So, we have to err on the safe side and treat everyone as potentially contagious (or able to spread the virus to others).

That is why health professionals and government officials have made many recommendations, including:

- Stay home if you're sick, so you don't infect others.
- Always cover a sneeze or cough so that droplets don't become airborne and reach others.
- Wear a mask so that if there are airborne droplets, they don't reach your nose or mouth.
- Stand six feet away from another person because the droplets don't usually travel that far.
- Stay away from crowds; the more people who are present, the greater likelihood at least one of them is infected (symptoms or not).
- Clean any surfaces that might have been contaminated by droplets with special bleach or alcohol disinfectants ("disinfectant" means against the infecting germ).
- Wash your hands for twenty seconds, multiple times a day. Washing hands removes the virus.



In the end, it is each person's immune system that fights the virus. The human immune system consists of cells and chemicals designed to fight threats to the body, in this case, an infectious threat. Some people, because of age or underlying medical conditions, don't have very strong immune systems, so the virus takes over. Other people have strong immune systems that go into overdrive, not only killing the virus but also destroying bodily organs in the process.

### **How might we explain this pandemic to children and teens?**

*Preschoolers:* If young children know nothing about the virus, it is probably best not to bring it up, unless someone they are related to or know well is ill. Another reason to mention it is if they cannot see certain people in person (like a grandparent) and wonder why. You should always assess what a child already knows by asking: "What do you know about the virus? What questions do you have?" These questions are also useful to see if the child has misinformation, such as that one gets sick because one was bad. Although young children may not pay much attention to adult discussions, they may pick up snippets of information from adult conversations or from older siblings.

If a young child asks why everyone has to stay home, one could say: “We are staying home so that we don’t get a germ. A germ is something that makes people sick. There is a germ going around that has made grown-ups and children very sick all over the world. Because it’s easy to get the germ, we are going to do things to keep us healthy, like stay home, cover our nose and mouth when we sneeze and cough, and wash our hands a lot. The germ can be in sneezes and coughs, so that is why we cover our nose and mouth and wash our hands. You can ask me any questions that you have about this germ, and I’ll try my best to answer them.”

***Elementary school-age children:*** It is less likely that elementary school-age children know nothing about the virus because they are not going to school, and they know there must be a reason for that. However, this age group may have much misinformation picked up from the media, older siblings, or friends. As with younger children, always assess what a child already knows, looking for any misinformation: “What do you know about the virus? Do you have questions?”

What might you say to a child of this age? “A germ is something that makes people sick, and a virus is one type of germ. There is a virus going around that has made

people very sick all over the world: adults, children, and even babies. The virus is a new one, so doctors don't know how to treat it or make it go away. Because it's easy to get the virus, we are going to do things to keep us healthy, like stay home, cover our nose and mouth when we sneeze and cough, and wash our hands a lot because the virus can be in sneezes and coughs, or on our hands. That's why you can't go to school or play with your friends, since we don't always know who has the virus and who doesn't. Doctors have found out that while some people get very sick or even die from the virus, other people don't seem to get very sick at all. So, the virus is kind of sneaky. That's why we have to play it safe. It's also why we have to clean surfaces, since the virus can live for a while on most surfaces. If you have questions about what I just said or about anything else about this virus, please ask me, and I'll try my best to answer your questions."

**Teens:** Depending on the age of your teen, most of the information provided in "background information" can be discussed with him or her.