



What to Say to Kids? How to Stay Sane at Home?

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara



*“The most important message our kids need to hear right now is now about what co-vid19 is, but about **who their adults are** – the people who will **care** for them and **carry** them through this storm.”*

DR DEBORAH MACNAMARA

KIDS NEWS & REVIEWS: Parents want to be honest but not terrify their children at this time. What would you recommend we tell our kids? What should they know and what can they handle? What is helpful and what is detrimental to share and discuss? Can you break this down for us by age groups.

DEBORAH: *The most important message that our kids need to hear in relation to Covid-19 is that we will take care of them and get through this difficult time. While we don't have all the answers about Covid-19, the reality is that information doesn't make a child feel secure – relationships do.*

The challenge is that we are struggling with our own alarm about Covid-19. This includes our worries about loved ones (some of whom are on the front lines), financial issues, as well our own health. We watch in horror as this invisible virus moves across the earth at lightning speed, upending life as we once knew it. You might wonder if it's possible to make a child feel safe in a storm of this magnitude? The answer is yes, because safety is about human attachment and we do have control over this.

Our children may have questions about why they aren't in school, why they have to wash their hands so much, or can't see other people right now. There are many places to go online for information about Covid-19 in terms of the facts. As parents, we can interpret this information to our children according to their level of understanding in a non-alarming tone and manner. In explaining Covid-19 to them we should consider the following:

- *What is the child's age and developmental readiness, that is, what are they going to understand? A preschooler doesn't understand the big picture*

whereas a teen is looking to their future and what it means for them in terms of schooling and their life. For a preschooler we might give a simple statement about what is happening, whereas for a teen, we might spend more time hearing about their thoughts and feelings.

- *Be clear and simple in your response – be concrete and don't speculate on what might happen.*
- *Reassure them that you believe there is a way through, and that you trust the adults who are working hard to help people who get sick. If you have people in your life who are sick with Covid-19, make sure you repeat this to them often.*
- *It is important to help a child express their thoughts and feelings. We may have strong ideas about what this means for us as well as our own frustration about it, but this is not what our children need. They are trying to make sense of their emotions and cannot handle ours on top of that. We need to show up and be there to guide them through this, not make them responsible for our emotions or insecurities.*

Honesty is an incredibly important virtue but that does not mean we have to be upfront and explicitly honest with our children about what has happened and what might happen with Covid-19. We need to think developmentally and what is appropriate to share and conceal to a child or a teen. The bottom line is we must give them a sense we will figure things out in the days ahead.

KIDS NEWS & REVIEWS: *I know each family is different but what general tips or advice would you like to offer parents while they are adjusting to all being housebound together.*

DEBORAH: *It is obvious to say but bears repeating that we need to be thoughtful about the amount of change that has happened in such a short time period, as well as the stress that comes with it. As we come together and frustration increases, a heavy dose of grace, mercy, and forgiveness for each other is likely good medicine for everyone. Besides being thoughtful and patient with each other and ourselves, the following strategies may be helpful too.*

Structure & Routine – *We all seem to have different comfort levels and ideas about structure and routine in our lives with some people finding it restrictive while others finding comfort in it. What is true for kids is that having some predictability to their day is not only a comfort, but will also help with their emotions and feelings of security. If you watch what professional childcare providers and preschool teachers do, you will see how effective they are in creating some order to the day, including routine songs to signal when it is time to clean up. Structure and routine is one of the biggest things they rely on to help the kids know when it is time to play, to eat, to sleep, and to have quiet time.*

When children can anticipate what will come next there can be less energy required to get them to transition. They are also more likely to follow the adult, and they are less likely to ask repeated questions such as, “what is the plan for the day.”

It is helpful to get them moving in the direction you want before they are moving in the direction you don't want.

DR DEBORAH MACNAMARA

Morning times may be reserved for high energy activities aimed at tiring them out and burning off steam such as dance parties, to building forts, to obstacle courses.

It may be helpful to sketch out a rough idea for the flow of your day including eating, sleeping routines, as well as play and/or learning. If you try it out and it doesn't work, then the next day can bring a new routine and flow with it too. Humans are adaptable and we can adjust to new routines and ways of being. The important thing is for adults to lead kids into these routines – for our own sanity and their security.

Play helps release emotions and to reduce alarm. *You might think play is frivolous time, but the science of play demonstrates its critical importance in helping to cope with emotions and to reduce anxiety.*

When we are facing separation and stressful situations, our emotional system can get busy with three powerful emotions – frustration, alarm, and intense pursuit for connection.

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These emotions can lead to problems such as angry outbursts, anxiety, and restless energy. Play is the best release for these emotions because it isn't real, doesn't count for anything or have consequences, and allows for emotional expression without repercussion to one's closest relationships. In other words, you shouldn't be getting into trouble for something that isn't real and doesn't really hurt anyone. The challenge of stress is how it can stir up overwhelming emotions that we don't have names for and can't be expressed. Children often don't have a conscious awareness of how they are stirred up and this is where play comes in.

The kind of play I am talking about can be done on their own (this is really beneficial for their development), with you, and/or other children in the same house. You may want to gather your kids in the morning and play or do activities, while setting up a routine for quiet time or play in the afternoon. If they are playing, it can give you the time you need to get other things done as well. For the most part, video games, TV and screen time that is entertainment based are really not true play but they may be required 'babysitters' when sanity and boiling frustration are on the line, in other words – use them as a last resort if you can.

Focus on the here and now – *In times of stress, our emotions can spill out of us over the smallest of things. This is usually a sign we are overwhelmed and overloaded. Some of the strategies we use in counselling when emotions are too big are called 'grounding.' This means you just focus on something else in detail – like going outside for a breath of fresh air, play some music and really listen to it, stare at your favourite picture and really see all the details in it. By paying attention to something else for a short break, you can help your emotions settle a bit and provide yourself with some emotional rest.*

Each day is a new one, and sometimes in the middle of stress we just need to focus on what is right in front of us. Don't have expectations of yourself that are unrealistic, while at the same time, don't count yourself out as being able to figure out a way through all of this.

Learning can be fun and playful – *Many parents are rightly concerned about the loss of a couple of months of school. Some kids will better accept their parent in a*

teaching role than others. Some kids will want to preserve their parent as a Mom or Dad but there is a way around all of this. The trick is to make learning fun which will serve to protect our role with them and reduce a child's resistance to learning. If school is 'work' we may find more resistance to our requests, but if we inject some fun into it with contests or games, kids will likely play along and learn at the same time.

The important thing to remember is that we need to lead through this time of great uncertainty and stress. This means we watch for signs when our kids are struggling such a stomach aches which could mean anxiety, to nightmares. We need to lead them to eat, to play, to sleep, to wash their hands, and more. This is best done through relationship and conveying a sense of delight, enjoyment, and warmth.

I wish you and your family all the best in these trying times.

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Dr. Deborah MacNamara is the author of ***Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)***, is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and Director of **Kid's Best Bet**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information please see www.macnamara.ca and www.neufeldinstitute.org.