As conversations around coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) increase, children may worry about themselves, family, and friends becoming ill with COVID-19.

Parents, family members, school staff, and other trusted adults can play an important role in helping children make sense of what they hear in a way that is honest, accurate, and minimizes anxiety or fear.

The CDC has created guidance to help adults have conversations with children about COVID-19 and ways they can avoid getting and spreading the disease. Adults should:

- Remain calm and reassuring
- Be available to talk and listen
- Avoid language that may blame others and lead to stigma
- Be mindful of what children see or hear on TV or online
- Provide information that is honest and accurate
- Teach children what they can do to reduce the spread of germs

Kids ask a lot of questions. Sometimes those questions make parents laugh, or even squirm. ("Where do babies come from?" is the classic.) But as the nation grapples with the outbreak of coronavirus, their inquiries may leave moms and dads stumped and searching for the right words.

What is coronavirus? Why is school closed? When can I see my friends again?

Although grown-ups don’t have all the answers, they can tell their children what they do know about coronavirus, and they can do it without alarming them.

Information is everywhere, and at this point, the kids have heard a lot about coronavirus. Some of it is very helpful, and some of it is a little too scary, and some of it’s not even true. The first step is to ask children what they already know, so you can identify a starting point for the conversation. Then share an honest, factual and age-appropriate message.

Jenni Evans, Parent Educator for The Parenting Center at Children’s Hospital notes: “We’re not going to say to kids, ‘Oh, there’s nothing to worry about.’ But we’re also not going to say, ‘This is really serious.’ You have to keep your child’s temperament in mind. If you have a child that tends to worry, they are going to need more factual information and fewer scary adjectives.”

Tell younger children that there is a “strong germ going around,” and encourage them to be extra diligent about practicing healthy habits and hygiene, Evans suggested. Shore up their safety by reminding them that you — the caregiver — are prepared and open to questions, and that this is temporary.
How to talk to children when their world is upside down

Parents should keep in mind that “anxiety is very contagious,” said Dr. Diane Franz, a child psychologist at Children’s Hospital New Orleans. “It’s important for parents to get their own anxiety under control, or at least fake it in front of their children if they are feeling anxious, because that will very much be communicated to their children, and that will increase everyone’s anxiety.” Franz encourages parents to take a break from the news and focus on the specific things they are doing to keep themselves and their families safe. If you can remain calm and optimistic, your children will feel a lot more comfortable, she said.

“Expect anxiety,” said Franz. “This is an unprecedented new time for all of us.”

Consistency is key

In an effort to stop the spread of coronavirus, Gov. John Bel Edwards ordered a monthlong shutdown of public and parochial schools throughout the state. Some institutions will shift to online learning programs, so that students can study from home. Still, the isolation and the dramatic change in routine will be difficult for children.

“Rather than throwing your hands in the air and going on vacation mode, think about rituals, transitions and routines that you can keep consistent,” said Evans. “Consistency is really important for people, especially for children who are feeling stressed out.”

“Do sensory and active play every day,” said Evans. This may include water play for toddlers and crafts with older children.

“Each day, have some together time that is mutually engaging and fun — whether that’s drawing, watching a movie, or taking a walk,” she added. “Don’t get buried in screens because that won’t work for very long. And we’ve got quite a few weeks ahead of us.”

Although The Parenting Center has temporarily closed because of coronavirus, staff members are still available to answer questions and offer parenting advice.

Visit chnola.org/the-parenting-center or call (504) 896-9591 for more information.