

PARENTING WELL IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

Kids are sponges, which is great and also frightening, right? Little ears are ALWAYS listening. With all the talk about COVID-19 and the many changes to family routines due to school closings, changes in parents' work schedules, and cancellations of many events, this can raise concerns and questions.

So how do we talk to our kids during this health crisis?

A few days ago, my five-year-old grandson came in the front door. As he did, I held up my hand to give him a high five. He left me hanging and said, "No high-fives, Gigi. You know—flu and corona-na-virus (yes, he added an extra syllable). So my teachers say, no high-fives."

As someone who's worked with kids and families for decades (and coached people through all kinds of fear and trauma), I can tell you the most important thing to keep in mind is that our emotions and reactions convey to our kids how they should feel.

If you're someone (like me) who follows Jesus, we have a hope that cannot be shaken. Every recommendation below has to start with that.

We can choose calm despite the crisis. We can build brave kids in the face of growing fear. Our homes can be a bright spot of resilience and help.

Here are some ideas:

- **Take a deep breath** before opening your mouth. We can bring peace into the chaos, or we can add to our kids' anxiety and confusion. They'll be taking their cues from us. If you don't feel calm, wait until you are to have this conversation. Also, remember our face often communicates much more than our words. What's your face communicating to your kids?
- **Their concerns are real.** You may not think your kids' fears are valid, but they are real to your child. Help reassure them by focusing on what you can do to protect yourself. Practice washing your hands. Give them a job to wipe off tables and doorknobs. Teach them to clean and how to sneeze in their elbow and cover their mouth when they cough.
- **Be a detective.** If your kid is acting out, rather than immediately going to discipline, connect with them, and try to dig into what they may be trying to tell you through their behavior. If they do ask questions or make comments, you feel you need to respond to, be curious, and follow up with a question. This will enable you to respond to the real question.
- **Talk with them about specifics as they're ready.** Depending on your kids' age, they may have questions about the coronavirus.
- **Be developmentally appropriate.** Even though it's true, the info may not be appropriate for your child. Let your child's comments and questions guide you as you use as few words as possible.

- **Turn off the news.** There is no predicting what will be on the news, pandemic or not. So limit what they may see. Watch the news after they're in bed.
- **Hold onto routines as much as possible.** Routines help our kids, and adults, feel safe. If routines do need to change, talk with your child about the changes, and give them time to process what's new with you.
- **Don't play the blame game.** Blaming the government, other countries or other people will not help reassure your kids. So don't do it.
- **Fill their minds with God's truth.** An effective way to battle anxiety and fear is through scripture. Choose verses to remind us that God is still in control. Pick a verse with your child and work on memorizing it. Say it at mealtime and before bed. Post it on your mirrors.
- **Share your toilet paper or other supplies that friends may need.** As schools close, kids who typically get free breakfast and lunch may be hungry. Neighbors who are working fewer hours, or not at all, might be financially struggling. As a family, talk about how you may share your stuff.
- **Be Jesus to your friends, neighbors, and family.** While we may be afraid and even sad, we have a hope that extends beyond this world. Wave to your neighbor, take their trash cans in, use your pooper scooper to clean up their yards (even if you don't have a dog anymore), or offer a smile or a virtual high five to strangers.
- **Be generous.** Being generous builds resilience in our kids. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from stress, adversity, failure, challenges, or even trauma. Kids who have more resilience can cope with adversity and pandemics in healthier ways. Being generous and serving others shows kids they aren't alone. They have value and can help others.

Most of all, be available. Listen. Play games and eat dinner together. Some of our actions that seem the most insignificant actually bring the most peace to our kids and help to ease our own feelings of helplessness. Remember, our emotions convey to our kids how they should feel. We can bring peace in the midst of chaos. We can provide stability to our kids, and others around us, in the midst of uncertainty.

We can bring light to a world that is hurting. Parents, we got this.