



Kids, Anxiety, and the Coronavirus

I knew it was only a matter of time. As soon as we started to hear the news of the coronavirus sweeping the world, I knew it would start to plague the lives of anxious children. As you maybe have read, anxiety itself is now an epidemic among children today—affecting one in four kids, with girls twice as likely to suffer from it as boys. When I describe anxiety with children and teenagers in my office where I've been counseling kids and families for 27 years, I describe it like the one loop roller coaster at the fair. Something that sounds frightening gets stuck in their little (or teenage) minds, and circles around and around and around so much that they can't really think about anything else.

The loop often tracks with their development. In other words, it's often about the scariest thing they can imagine happening at their age, as I outline in my book, *Raising Worry-Free Girls*. For preschool age children, for example, they're often looping about something bad happening to a parent. As they get older, their fears center around failure or illness or other real-world dangers. Enter, a real-life virus that is now being considered a pandemic.

As I work with children and teenagers alike, one of the first things I have them do is name their worry. They can call it the Worry Monster—or really whatever name they choose. I have one girl who simply named hers Bob. But when they separate out the voice in their head, it, first of all, loses some of its power. And it also becomes much easier to recognize when it pops up again. Therefore, when a child comes to you and says, "I'm afraid I'm going to throw up at school today" for the 9th day in a row without any sign of illness, you can respond with, "That sounds a lot like your worry monster to me." And the magic of a named worry monster is that he will likely show back up in other forms throughout their lives. So, when they're afraid of being separated from you at six, or failing a test at eleven, or falling in a track meet at 16, the same tricks to fight the worry monster work. In other words, it's never really about the subject of the loop. It's more about how worry impacts the brain and their anxious thoughts.

Let's go back to the coronavirus. With the worry monster in mind, we want to be wise in how we handle conversation with the kids in our lives around this topic. A few suggestions would include:

1) Do your homework first. Children always feel safer when the grown-ups they love are the source of information. Be the source for all things for your child. You want to be able to answer any questions he or she might have from a factual standpoint.

2) Keep your own sense of perspective. If, as a parent, you have anxiety, your child is seven times more likely to have it yourself. And anxious parents often inadvertently use more catastrophic language. So just make sure your own fears around the virus aren't creeping into your conversation. Your anxious child is constantly on high alert and will be on the ready to download your anxiety to theirs.

3) Let them lead. Kids have a built-in sense of asking the questions for which they're ready to hear the answers. Give them an opportunity to ask. If you lead the conversation, you could end up oversharing and giving them more information that only makes them more anxious. Ask what questions they might have and start the conversation there.

4) Tell them age-appropriate truths. As your child asks questions, keep the answers brief, concrete, and age-appropriate. Again, you want to be the source for your child. They need to know that you will always tell them the truth, but the truth that is appropriate for where they are developmentally and emotionally.

5) Remind them of those who are working to find a solution. It will help your child to know that some of the smartest doctors and healthcare experts in the world are working day and night to stop the spread and find a cure. You're also doing all that you would normally do to keep your child and family protected—just as you would with the flu.

6) Talk about what they can control. Focus on giving them tasks to empower them. They can wash their hands before and after they eat and use the bathroom or after they've been in public places. You do want to make sure the hand washing doesn't become excessive, however. They can cover their mouths when they sneeze and cough. They can do their part to help keep themselves and others healthy.

7) Circle back around to the worry monster. Remind them how smart that old worry monster can be. He might try to use the Coronavirus to make them think they aren't okay. It's hard for children who've beaten their worries in the past to remember the tools they've used before. The same tools work however the worry monster tries to bother them. What worked before? What do they want to remember doing that helped? Have them tell you three times they remember feeling brave in the past few weeks.

In *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, I defined anxiety as an overestimation of the problem and an underestimation of themselves. Your child is stronger than his fear. She's smarter than the worry monster. He just may need your help remembering in the face of the Coronavirus. He can do it, and so can you.