

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK



Helping Your Family Cope With COVID-19

As we struggle to contain the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), daily life has fundamentally changed for many families. While fire and EMS personnel continue to serve their communities on the frontlines, many family members remain confined at home without their typical daily structure and activities.

For more information about common emotional reactions to the current virus outbreak, see [COVID-19 Behavioral Health Considerations](#).

If your spouse or children are having a difficult time coping during this time, your family is not alone. While family members may understand the inherent risks of your job, the threat of exposure to COVID-19 may trigger unique fears for your partner and children. To help support your family during this time, consider these suggestions.

Support Your Partner

Whether worried about your health or consumed by the news cycle while managing kids at home, your partner may be coping with a high level of stress during this time. Try to communicate with your partner at whatever frequency you normally would. Encourage your partner to adopt the following coping strategies, especially while you are on shift or away from home:

- Find one source of **trustworthy health information** and stick with it, thus limiting exposure to misinformation and rumors. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the local health department can provide the most timely and accurate information. Resources specific to IAFF members are available at www.iaff.org/coronavirus.
- **Set limits** on exposure to news, radio and social media, especially for kids and teens. Consider turning off push notifications from these sources. Limit checking news reports to only once or twice a day for 15 minutes.
- Find a way to **stay connected** to other family and friends who are part of the family's normal routine. Communicating over the phone, video chat or text can go a long way in reducing family members' feelings of isolation.

- Have some go-to activities that provide a short-term **distraction**. Activities may include getting a start on spring cleaning or catching up on a favorite television show. For partners home with kids, a family board game, crafts or a cooking project are good ways to get everyone involved.
- For older kids, consider age-appropriate programming while the parent takes a 30-minute break in the next room. Parents will benefit from finding a **relaxing activity** to calm the body and the mind. Music, a quick bath or meditation are simple, free activities that can be done at home when parents need a break.
- Try to **limit engagement** with any extended family members or friends who trigger anxiety for your family members.
- Get moving. Strive for 30 minutes of **physical activity** every day. Exercise not only helps improve mood but can boost the immune system as well. While kids should avoid gathering in parks, a bike ride or a family walk is okay. Younger kids may also follow along with their parent during an exercise or dance video.

How to Talk to Your Kids About COVID-19

Parents, teachers and other trusted adults can help children understand COVID-19 by providing honest, accurate and timely information that minimizes anxiety. Consider the following strategies:

- **Explain COVID-19 based on your child's developmental level.** For younger kids, you might remind them of the last time they felt very sick, had a fever or a persistent cough. Explain COVID-19 is similar, but has spread very quickly throughout communities, and some adults are more likely to get sick than others. Emphasize that kids are the least likely to get sick from COVID-19 but still have an important role to play to prevent the spread of germs.
- **Ask children what they know already.** Pay attention to what your child has heard from friends, television or online. Take time to correct rumors and dispel misinformation. If he or she asks you something you don't know, acknowledge you don't have all the answers and redirect focus to what kids can control today.
- **Remain calm, reassuring and available to talk.** As a parent, you set the emotional tone for the family and how your kids will respond to these unprecedented times. Reassure your kids that they are currently safe and cared for and that you are available whenever they have questions. Empathize with any feelings of frustration, boredom or isolation your kids express, while reminding them this is a temporary situation that will not last forever.
- **Routine is required.** Too much unstructured down time can create anxiety for children, teens and adults. Explain to your children that while school is closed, they will still have to follow a routine that includes predictable mealtimes, activity, outdoor play and bedtime. Take advantage of any suggested distance learning or homework your child's teachers have provided.
- **Avoid language that may blame others or lead to stigma.** Emphasize that fighting COVID-19 is everyone's responsibility. Remind kids that children in other countries are experiencing many of the same feelings and reactions.
- **Explain social distancing as temporary but necessary.** While staying home from school may seem exciting at first, several days of not seeing friends or playing sports will take a toll on some kids. Explain social distancing as a simple but effective strategy to prevent germs from jumping from one person to another. Emphasize this is a temporary situation.

Empower Your Kids With Hand Hygiene

Talk to your children directly about doing their part to reduce the spread of germs in your home and neighborhood. Require your kids to practice common-sense precautions at home, including washing hands often for at least 20 seconds, covering their cough or sneezes and abiding by social distancing recommendations. Be vigilant about modeling these behaviors for your kids as well.

Kids of First Responders May Need Extra Reassurance

For children of fire fighters and EMS personnel, convincing your children you are protected from COVID-19 can be complicated. Don't offer false realities or make promises you cannot keep. Instead, acknowledge your children's fears and the inherent risks of your job, while offering reassurance that you are doing everything possible to stay healthy and protect yourself from virus exposure on and off the job. Educate older children about some of the PPE precautions and protocols that are in place to reduce your risk of exposure.

► Follow the latest IAFF guidelines on dispatch protocol, PPE and decontamination at www.iaff.org/coronavirus

To learn more, visit www.iaff.org/coronavirus or www.iaff.org/behavioral-health