

Talking Points for Parents and Teachers about the Coronavirus (2019 nCoV)

Take Advantage of Teachable Moments

Background

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is closely monitoring an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a novel (new) coronavirus named COVID-19. The outbreak first started in Wuhan, China, but cases have been identified in a growing number of other international locations, including the United States. As of 3/5/2020, there were 163 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus in the U.S. By comparison, there are more than 80,000 confirmed cases in China that have resulted in 3,000 deaths. Most of the 492 who have died are known to have already been in poor health. It is important to note that there have been no reported deaths in the U.S. Sharing this information may help reassure children that there is no immediate risk to themselves, their friends, or their family.

Currently, the risk of 2019-nCoV infection is low for the general public in the U.S. At this time, there are no cases in Missouri, though that could change at any time as risk is based on exposure. We are in the middle of flu and respiratory disease season and most of the population is at a greater risk of contracting seasonal influenza than coronavirus. Staff or students who have recently traveled to any area of China, or who have had contact with someone who has recently traveled to China and is ill, have an increased risk of becoming ill. If staff or students with one of these exposures become ill, medical care should be sought immediately so they can be evaluated. Symptoms of coronavirus are most similar to lower respiratory infections with patients having fever, cough and shortness of breath.

Key Actions

1. **Be aware of your own behavior.** It's important for parents and teachers to understand the effect their own behaviors and emotions can have on children. If you're visibly upset or react in a way that suggests you're fearful, they'll take their cues from you. Just remember to stick to what we know about the outbreak.
2. **Tell them the facts at their developmental level. Be honest. Stay informed.** Find out what it is that they're afraid of and what they already know about it. Try to answer specific questions, even if those questions feel uncomfortable. Keep things in perspective and explain that it is unlikely anyone they know in the U.S. will get sick.
 - a. "We're going to do everything we can to stay healthy. We're going to keep informed, and if we have other questions we don't know the answer to, we will recommend that people talk to their doctors."
 - b. "Doctors around the world are working to find solutions and care for people that are already sick."
3. **Explain the efforts being made to contain the virus. Keep perspective.** Health authorities in China appear to have acted quickly. Travel in and out of the areas affected by the virus has been restricted. Scientists are working to develop a vaccine. In the U.S.,

the government is carefully monitoring the situation and officials at the Department of Health and Human Services believe the risk to the public remains low. A federal task force is leading the American response to the coronavirus so students can be confident any confirmed cases will be isolated and treated quickly.

4. **Offer practical advice. Give students a sense of agency.** For the time being the easiest way to reduce the risk of becoming affected by viruses of any sort (including the common cold) is to cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze, keep hands clean by washing them regularly with soap and water or an alcohol-based rub and avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth. Use extra caution if you must be near anyone displaying symptoms such as a fever or a cough. These are easy habits for children to adopt and should help them feel as though they're able to exert some control over their circumstances. Use the opportunity to explain why it's important to stay home if you feel sick.

Dealing with Emotions

- Children's emotions feed off of the emotions of the adults in their lives.
- Remind them of what is in their power.
 - Wash their hands.
 - Cover sneezes and coughs.
- Seek help if worry is making you struggle.

Handling Bullying or Uncaring Behaviors

- The spread of this virus does not have to do with Asian ethnicity or culture - it is unkind to tease or bully students who are of Asian ethnicity about the virus. Class meetings may be a good place to address this topic. You can start by sharing facts we know about the virus and ask students the following:
 - Can you think of a time when you were unfairly blamed for something? How did that make you feel?
 - What are some ways we can make sure everyone feels safe and welcome in our classroom?
 - What are some ways we can make sure our class is as healthy as possible?
 - What would be a good response if you see someone make an uncaring comment toward another student?

Prevention

When a new illness is circulating, it's natural for people to ask what they can do to protect themselves and their families. The best guidance at this point is to take the same precautions recommended for flu season:

- Staff and students should stay home when they are sick.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues, or cough/sneeze into the inner elbow.
- Practice good hand washing with soap and water as often as possible, if soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

- Encourage flu vaccination among both staff and students.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces in classrooms or offices. (The District's custodial staff does this nightly.)

Sources

- Bassi, Anna. [How to have a panic-free conversation with your kids about the coronavirus.](#)
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- Mississippi Department of Health. [Novel Coronavirus Outbreak.](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [2019 Novel Coronavirus \(2019-nCoV\) in the U.S.](#)
- Mahtani, S. & O'Grady, S. [Coronavirus live updates. The Washington Post, 2-5-2020.](#)