

5 Questions Parents Can Ask Their Children About How They are Feeling During the Pandemic

**By: Lois Dodson, Med, LPC, NBCC,
Student Assistance Program Coordinator**

Everything feels pretty topsy turvy for families right now. Parents and children are facing unknown periods of time together at home, and everyone's emotions are high. This often results in less than perfect communication between parents and their children. But it is important that everyone, especially your children, be offered an open and supportive environment where they can express their feelings and ask questions. There are no right or wrong ways to talk with children about this public health emergency, but here are some suggestions that may be helpful.

1. Do not force children to talk about things if they resist. It may be easier for some children to journal, or draw pictures to express their feelings.
2. Answer questions honestly. Do not make unrealistic promises.
3. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Use information from a reliable fact-based source only.
4. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. If your child or teen makes statements like "I wish I wasn't stuck here" or "Our house sucks", remember that they are experiencing change and loss too, and practice empathy and flexibility. Respond with statements like "I absolutely understand your disappointment, this is really hard" or "I can only imagine how hard it is to be all this time without your friends and activities."

An easy and non-threatening way to create opportunities for children to talk about their feelings is to have dinner table conversation. Here are some tips:

1. Start a new family routine, where everyone, including adults, shares their "highs" and "lows" of the day, i.e. what was good, what was not.
2. Ask "What have you heard about the virus?"
3. Ask "What are you most concerned about?"
4. Ask "What has been the hardest thing for you about this situation?"
5. Ask "What can I (or any other family member) do to help you right now?"
6. Ask "What are you most thankful for right now?"

If your child shares his/her feelings, do not minimize their concerns and do not take their disappointment and frustration personally. Acknowledge and validate that this is what they are feeling. Thank them for sharing with you. By creating an open environment where they feel supported to express emotions and ask questions, you can help them cope with this stressful experience and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.