

Talking About the Coronavirus With Students

Laura Saunders, Psy.D., ABPP, is a child and adolescent psychologist at Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living. Scholastic magazine editors spoke with Saunders about how to talk about the new coronavirus with students.

What should teachers tell students to do to stay safe from the coronavirus?

The most important thing to do is to wash your hands regularly. This is a virus—kind of like the flu or the common cold—that is spread through contact, so try to keep your hands away from your face and wash your hands regularly. For teachers, especially teachers of younger students, you want things to be fairly simply stated: Wash your hands, never share food with your neighbor—do some basic things as a way to prevent the spread of germs.

When should teachers have these discussions with students? Should teachers bring it up, or should they wait for students to bring it up?

Now is the time because it's in the news frequently. Parents are talking about it, and that's also worrisome to me—kids get a lot of misinformation from overhearing parental conversations.

What are the signs to look for to know if students are anxious about germs?

While it's important to wash your hands regularly—meaning before or after particular activities—that doesn't mean you wash your hands multiple times between those activities. You're looking for overly repetitive behavior or over-ritualized behavior—[as in] they're not just washing their hands now but they refuse to touch the doorknob or they constantly need to clean their desk with a wipe. That's a sign that they're tapping into some underlying more obsessive anxiety. I would look out for kids who seem more avoidant or fearful—they don't want to leave the classroom for some reason or they want support going to the bathroom when typically they've always gone to the bathroom on their own. You're going to see some behavior that is nontypical for that child.

How can teachers help students cope with anxiety they are having?

Validate their feelings: "I hear that you're worried about picking up this virus. There's been a lot of information about it on the news, but let's get some good information." So validate, but then stay fact-based. I don't think it's ever good to be dismissive, like, "Oh, that's silly to worry about that."

Do you have any other advice for parents and teachers about helping students during this time?

The most important thing is to become well-informed and provide fact-based information. . . . [Also,] we need to be more mindful about the conversations that we're having in the presence of students. Physically separate yourself—step 10 feet farther away, use a quieter voice, ask for some space from students around you. Just don't assume that kids are not listening to you, because kids are always listening to you when you're within earshot.

What if students make unkind or biased comments to other students about the coronavirus? How should a teacher intervene, and what should he or she say?

I would deal with that like any other sort of mean or unkind behavior by reiterating the rules of kindness. And again, it's misinformation. "Sally lives here in our town also. Nobody here has any more germs than anybody else." Address it for the discrimination that it is.

For more on how to handle biased responses to coronavirus, go to:

<https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/coronavirus-counteracting-biased-responses>