



Talking to Kids About Coronavirus (COVID-19)



Michael Rich, MD, MPH
The Mediatrixian



Philip McRae, PhD

Dr Michael Rich and Dr Philip McRae

WE FIND OURSELVES THRUST INTO EXTRAORDINARY TIMES. In December 2019, Canadians celebrated the holidays feeling prosperous and largely insulated from problems faced by others. Now, people around the world are all feeling a growing anxiety about a faceless, still-materializing threat to our health from a novel coronavirus, COVID-19.

Our students, children and youth are watching the COVID-19 pandemic unfold and are listening in as adults, or endless 24/7 news and social media streams, discuss the crisis and its many complications. What, though, should we say to our children and youth about COVID-19? What should we do? How will we get through this?

To help answer these questions and many others, Dr McRae asked his friend and colleague, Michael Rich, MD, MPH, to share his thoughts. Dr Rich is a practising pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital, an associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, and associate professor of social and behavioral sciences at the Harvard School of Public Health. Michael is also the director of the Centre on Media and Child Health at Harvard and has created a very popular blog called [Ask the Mediatrixian](#), along with podcasts, media "Tip Sheets" for parents, and clinical guidelines for professionals, all freely available at www.cmch.tv.

Michael has a great affinity for Albertans and has travelled across our province for many years as coprincipal investigator on the [Growing Up Digital \(GUD\) Alberta research project](#). In the interest of navigating these uncertain and historical times together, Dr McRae recorded an interview with Dr Rich, and shared both the questions asked and his informed and thoughtful responses. You can listen to that conversation online [here](#).

"We are living in an extraordinary time with COVID19. It has been said that extraordinary times give rise to extraordinary people. This is true. But these were not extraordinary people to begin with. They were ordinary people who became extraordinary because of the demand of the times. You and I and our children are those ordinary people. Let us become extraordinary, together."



What Should I Say?



How might we talk with kids about coronavirus (COVID-19)?

1. BE TRUTHFUL.

We must tell our children the truth with confidence. Tell them what we *know* and acknowledge what we *don't know*, not with fear, but with caution. We can defend against the unknown with the known.

2. WHAT WE KNOW.

Talk to them about **washing their hands**. Tell them to **cover their mouth and nose with their elbow** if they sneeze or cough (and then wash their hands anyway). Tell them **not to touch their faces**. **Clean surfaces** that are frequently touched, like doorknobs and countertops, with disinfectant wipes.

Face masks do little to protect the uninfected. They *do* contain the infectious respiratory droplets spread by those infected. For your best protection, **leave the limited supply of masks** for those with respiratory symptoms like cough or fever and for health professionals. If anyone has symptoms of cough or fever, **put a mask on, isolate from others**, particularly older and medically vulnerable people, and **seek medical attention immediately**.

3. WHAT WE DON'T KNOW.

We don't know who is infected and spreading viruses before they are symptomatic (for example, showing a fever and/or dry cough), so we must behave as if everyone might be. This is not to make us fearful of each other, but to respect that any of us might be unsuspecting carriers of this indiscriminate virus. In fact, while children and youth are at much lower risk for poor outcomes from COVID-19 infections, they are, as a result, more likely to be asymptomatic (showing no symptoms) and may infect those more vulnerable.

Since we are not yet completely sure of how, or how easily, COVID-19 is spread, we must avoid infection with the simple,

practical strategies that we have taught children are essential since they were toddlers—*wash your hands, cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, don't touch your face, clean surfaces that we touch like counters and doorknobs, and isolate yourself and seek medical attention if you develop symptoms.*

4. SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION.

If children and parents have symptoms of cough or fever, reach out for medical advice and possible care. While the odds are that it is a common cold or another (non-corona) virus, only health professionals can make that determination. If you have concerns about health, call Alberta's Health Link at 811 and visit alberta.ca/covid19. We are learning from our health professionals new information all the time on COVID-19, so be sure to keep informed by Alberta Health Services (AHS).

5. TRUTH VS FANTASY.

Rely on public health officials like Alberta's Chief Medical Officer—alberta.ca/covid19—to inform and protect us. Beware disaster capitalists offering "cures by sauna" or sunny fantasies of a vaccine just around the corner. Remember that rumours and fantasy explode on digital platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and Tik Tok and operate like their own thought viruses on the teenage brain. You need hard facts with which you can make informed and effective decisions.

We have done a good job of helping our children become critical thinkers, to be skeptical of what they hear and to check sources. Now we need to help our children use their critical thinking to recognize, rely on and share proven facts about COVID-19.



What Should I Say?

6. LOOK TO THE HELPERS.

We can learn from Fred Rogers, who always knew how to explain the painful, even the unexplainable, to children. Let us focus on the helpers. Doctors, nurses, public health officials, psychologists, social workers are staying at work so that we can stay at home. But there are many more helpers who may be invisible until we look—truck drivers bringing needed food and supplies, custodians who are cleaning and disinfecting our schools and stores, teachers who are preparing online curricula, scientists who are working on preventions, cures and a vaccine.

Our children and youth can also become helpers (in a safe way) during the pandemic by brainstorming ways, while physically distant, to support those in their local and global community. Small actions can have a large impact on communities, at home and around the world. For example, think about helping those who do not have food security in your community, or consider ways to take actions that support or develop (virtual) networks to reduce loneliness and support well-being and mental wellness. In becoming helpers, we can all feel less helpless.



Get Inspired—Make Connections—Get Involved—Have an Impact.



What Should I Do?

 **The Conversation**
Watch Part 2. Click here.

Physical Distancing and Flattening the Curve

Why are we supposed to be “social distancing”?

Social distancing involves taking steps to limit the number of people you come into close contact with so that you can help reduce risk for all of us and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The idea of physically keeping 2 metres (6 feet) apart to avoid viral transmission is unfamiliar and feels unnatural at a time when we want to be surrounded by others for security. If we think of distancing as a strategy to protect ourselves, it is far too easy to believe that we are strong enough to weather anything and can conduct our lives as usual. While it may be true that our individual immune systems and resilience will protect us from death, distancing is not to protect ourselves—it is to save the most vulnerable.

We must be aware of not only those people with whom we come into proximity, but all the people that they came close to, and all the people they came close to, and ... When we are exposed to one person, we are exposed to crowds of people, most of whom we do not know. We may pick up the virus at playdates or when mixing with those outside of our immediate family and not even know it. Then we come into contact with others, who come into contact with others, who come into contact with ... an ever-branching tree of people who may be much more vulnerable than we are. Older people and those with pre-existing medical conditions have less powerful immune systems, and this places them at risk for poor outcomes, even death, from COVID-19.

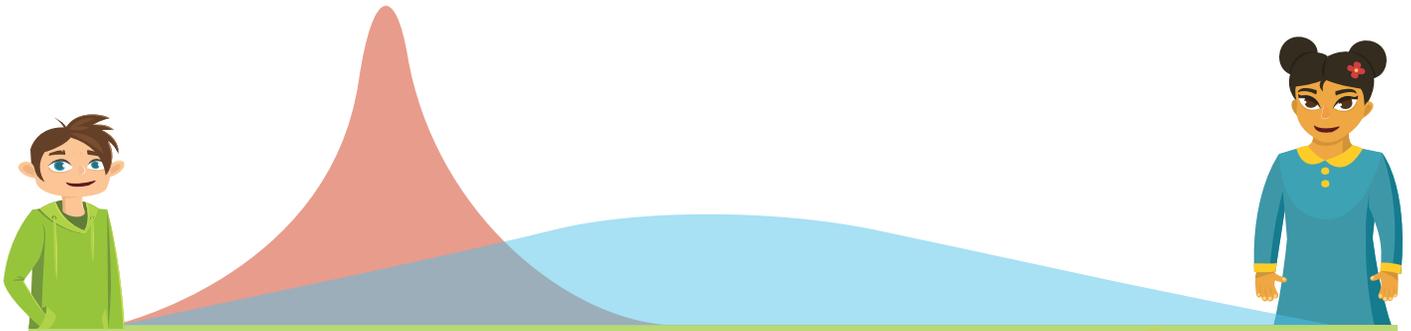
Distancing is not to protect you, but to protect Grannie or Grandpa, yours or someone else’s. Alberta Health Services has developed some new resources on social distancing to make things easier for Albertans, such as steps you should take while grocery shopping, riding in an elevator or on public transportation. You can find these resources at alberta.ca/covid19 in the “Help Prevent the Spread” section of the website.

Socially Connecting While Physically Distancing.

While the current catchphrase is “social distancing,” to be both accurate and compassionate we should really be talking about *physical distancing*. These are stressful times, and we all feel anxiety. That anxiety is many times worse when combined with loneliness and a sense that we have no one to turn to if things go wrong.

We need to stay socially connected, in the deep and sustaining ways that we are connected with family, friends and community. So while physically distancing, we must be intentional about socially connecting to combat both loneliness and fatigue from contending with the social and emotional changes of the pandemic. This can be done in a variety of ways:

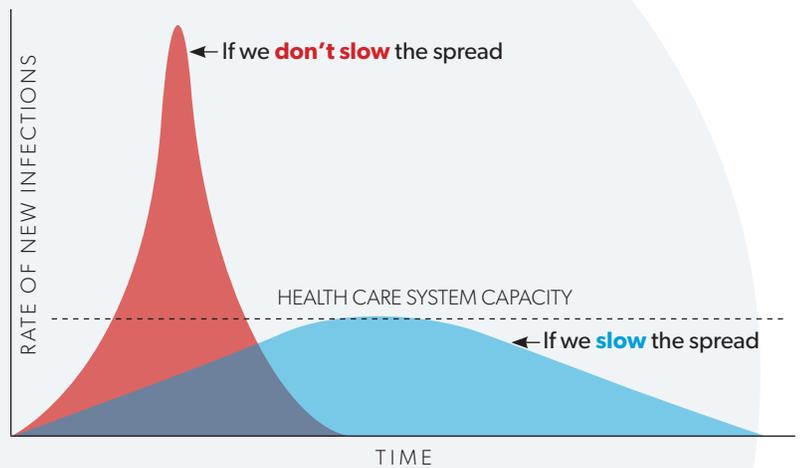
- Schedule regular virtual hangouts or online meet-ups between friends.
- Cook or eat online together with friends or family.
- Play games together in a virtual community.
- Have children put their arts and crafts in windows of their homes. If we still have mobility in our neighbourhoods, others can look at this showcase as they walk (not in groups) by the houses and admire children’s creations.
- Play music together online—check out the creative use of tech to connect the world at [Playing for Change](#).
- Read a book together online, or create a virtual book club for children and youth.
- Gather families together online so that babies, grannies/grandpas, aunts/uncles, brothers/sisters can virtually see each other in real time.

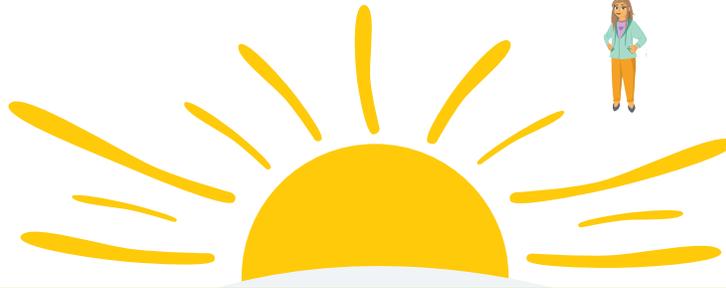


What Should I Do?

What does it mean to “flatten the curve”?

The idea of flattening the curve is to slow down the rate of new infections. In the face of COVID-19, we are all equally at risk, if not of death from the virus, of being unable to access needed health care if our system gets overwhelmed. Those who get sick from COVID-19 may need to be hospitalized, cared for in an intensive care unit (ICU), require a ventilator to breathe. If many are infected rapidly, ICU beds can fill and all the ventilators can be used. These are ICU beds and ventilators that may be needed for victims of motor vehicle collisions, heart attacks or any other illness. Any of us can die, not of COVID-19, but of easily manageable medical conditions—manageable, that is, if we have flattened the curve to make the existing resources available.





How Will We Get Through This?



With children at home, how can parents work remotely and retain their sanity?

Don't treat this as an indefinite "snow day."

Because this is a break in our life pattern of unknown duration, the best response to reduce anxiety about COVID-19 and loss of learning and productivity is to re-create our familiar routines. Duplicate at home the conditions of school and work as much as possible. Work with your teachers across Alberta, who will be in regular contact with your children, and remember that we are all partners in learning. Create a schedule that parallels what you normally do on school/work days. Schedule the same waking and bedtimes, regular mealtimes, "class time" for learning/working, with breaks in between for physical activity like walking the dog, shooting hoops or a building project.

Remember that children and youth need their "friend time," so schedule blocks of time to Facetime or Skype, game together and so on. Also, schedule time to do nothing. Embrace rather than avoid boredom. Boredom can lead to incredible creativity in human beings, so avoid filling every moment with scheduled time. Write the entire family schedule down on a whiteboard or paper posted on the refrigerator as an agreed-upon structure that is visible to all.

Get out into nature, but avoid playgrounds.

If possible, and if you are not sheltered in place by an order of the provincial health authority, get outside and play in the natural world. Physical activity is important for your family's health, and being outside is a healthy option for children. While outside, children will still need to practice physical distancing (other than healthy family members) and remain 2 metres (6 feet) apart. You can build a fort (outside or in your own home) or the family can go for a walk together. Avoid playgrounds. [The National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\), UCLA and Princeton University scientists](#) have found that the virus can live up to two (2) or three (3) days on plastic and stainless steel surfaces.

Use this time to learn something special.

Let your children reclaim the joy of learning for learning's sake by pursuing something they can't do in school. A Grade 5 student is creating a podcast on how 10-year-olds respond to the news; his younger sister is building Notre Dame Cathedral with toothpicks. One of Dr Rich's children is learning animal biology by helping out at a sheep farm during lambing season; the other is learning computer coding. Dr McRae's teenager is learning about micro-lending programs by participating in kiva.org, while his tween is learning how to build and safely launch a rocket. Learning for learning's sake can get lost among required assignments during school—grab this opportunity!

Discover the Internet as a power tool.

Children and youth are expert at using smartphones and interactive media. They move seamlessly between online and offline space. But it is too easy for them to slide into the path of least resistance and easy diversion online. The Internet has become their playground. But now it must become their primary workplace and social space.

This is an opportunity for them to reassess their relationship with and use of the Internet, recognizing it as a powerful tool. Their use of the Internet can do great good when they are learning and connecting authentically with others, but it can displace more meaningful and sustaining offline activities when used solely to entertain. And it can do great harm when used thoughtlessly, objectifying and marketing oneself on social media, not to mention trolling, cyberbullying, sexting and other unhealthy behaviours. We have done a great job of making it possible to have the world at our fingertips without moving from our homes. Now that we must stay in our homes, our children, and all of us, must learn to self-regulate our use of this power tool.



How Will We Get Through This?

What do I do when kids are bored out of their minds at home?

Congratulate them for achieving the state in which Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso and other geniuses did their best work! We have fallen into bad habits of going online and filling all of our unscheduled time with whatever we can find, but we have denied ourselves the empty space and the mild discomfort of boredom in which creativity and imagination thrive. Only by experience can children and youth discover that boredom is fertile ground for their thoughts that no one has ever thought before.

How much screen time should my children have while I work from home?

We know in this difficult time that entertainment media may provide a valuable and relaxing escape or distraction for families. Children home from school with limited physical interaction with others will almost certainly spend more time using media than they typically do. Talk to them about this, let them recognize it, but also talk about how it's only temporary. Then be sure to work with your children to make the best choices about their media use, and become an active participant in the videos, games, music or apps that they are using. All media are educational. What our children watch or do with media is what they learn.

Several [age-based tip sheets](#) are available for parents at www.cmch.tv. Below are some suggestions for how to best use media with your school-aged child:

Video

- Be conscious of how much media coverage of the pandemic your children are watching, and limit their exposure to disturbing images and the 24/7 breaking news cycle.
- The more children watch TV, the more likely they are to gain weight, have sleep problems and have poor attention. Encourage your child to participate in different activities, such as playing outside or reading.

- Advertisements on television and online can influence children's food choices. Limit commercials by using ad-free streaming services, or by fast-forwarding through commercials.
- Videos that show violence, drinking, smoking and drug use can lead to children copying those behaviours. Monitor the TV shows and movies your children watch, limiting their exposure to these unhealthy behaviours.

Reading Materials

- Reading can help children learn and develop their critical thinking skills. Help your child choose age-based reading materials that interest and challenge them.

Music

- Listening to music can help children's language skills and creative thinking, and promote their awareness of other cultures. Help your child choose music that they enjoy and that contains healthy messages.

Video Games

- The Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) rates video games based on content. Games that are rated for everyone (E) are usually well suited for school-aged children, but some may still be too violent or scary for your child. Play through video games first, or read reviews before allowing your child to play.
- Some video games can help children develop healthy social skills and encourage physical activity. Help children choose games that require working with others to accomplish a goal or that get them up and moving.

Apps

- There are many entertainment and learning-based apps aimed at school-aged children. Choose apps for your child based on their likes and learning needs, such as a drawing app, memory quiz or nonviolent game.



How Will We Get Through This?

How do we get through this? Together!

Pandemics can be hard on individual relationships and on our normal functioning as a society. It is too easy to panic and fight for ourselves. This is not like a war where there is an enemy to overcome. This is not “us” against “them.” This is us *with* us. We need each other to survive. We, the people, are at equal risk and need to work together toward the common good.

Flip the “M”—ME must become WE! Look up from your phone or device and smile at someone. We are living in an extraordinary time. It has been said that extraordinary times give rise to extraordinary people. This is true. But these were not extraordinary people to begin with. They were ordinary people who became extraordinary because of the demand of the times. You and I and our children are those ordinary people. Let us become extraordinary, together. COVID-19 is more than a blizzard—it is a winter. And summer is coming, and it will come sooner when we work together.



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