

# Countering COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Stigma and Racism: Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Concerns over COVID-19 can make children and families anxious and may also lead to placing blame on others who are **perceived** to be associated with the outbreak. Though the initial spread of COVID-19 occurred in China, it is important to inform children in a developmentally appropriate manner that the disease is linked to a geographic location and not to a race or nationality. People who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) are currently being subjected to racism related to the COVID-19 virus. It is important that parents and caregivers help children identify harmful language and behavior and encourage children to stop it.

Children look to adults for guidance on how to respond to stressful events. Adults can help children understand the importance of treating all people with dignity and not associating entire *groups* of people with events that occur in different parts of the country or world. **COVID-19 does not recognize race, nationality, or ethnicity.** Individuals of Chinese ancestry, or of any other Asian nationality, are not more vulnerable to this illness. Accurate information is essential to minimize anxiety about COVID-19 and ensuring that Asian communities are not unfairly targeted or stigmatized. **To help in this effort, adults must model acceptance and compassion in their words and behavior.**

## Tips for Parents and Caregivers

***Model acceptance and compassion.*** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid making negative statements about any racial, ethnic, or religious group. Reach out to your neighbors and colleagues who might feel at risk because of their ethnicity, religion, or other traits.

***Provide useful information.*** Accurate information about people, events, reactions, and feelings is empowering. Use language that is developmentally appropriate for children. Make sure that all information is factually true. This is especially important when news reports have negative statements about any specific group.

***Avoid stereotyping people or countries.*** Children can easily generalize negative statements to students in their classes and community. Focusing on the nationality, ethnicity, affiliations, or appearance of those who live where COVID-19 originated can create prejudice, anger, and mistrust for innocent groups of people. Be clear about your statements and biases, and help children understand their own prejudices.

***Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately.*** Make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable. Talk to the children involved about the reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity. Consistently speak up if you hear, see, or read discriminatory comments and explain to children why the behavior or statement was offensive.

***Discuss how it would feel to be blamed unfairly by association.*** Ask children if they have ever gotten in trouble for something a sibling or friend did and how they felt. Would they consider it fair if their entire class were punished for something that happened in the hallway outside their classroom? Older children might want to consider how

they would feel (or have felt) for being criticized or harassed because of how they look, what they wear, or for their group of friends.

**Explore children's fears.** Even children who understand information about COVID-19 may not be able to express fears, form questions, or describe assumptions or conclusions they may have made. Use activities, role-playing, and discussions to explore their fears about the outbreak and their feelings about various groups from diverse cultures or lifestyles.

**Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse groups.** Identify people of diverse ethnicities, religions, and/or lifestyles that children know and who have a positive place in their lives. These could be neighbors, friends, school personnel, healthcare professionals, members of their faith community, or local merchants. Discuss the many characteristics, values, and experiences the children have in common with these people.

**Identify "heroes" of varying backgrounds involved in response to traumatic events.** These include firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, military personnel, public officials, medical workers, teachers, faith leaders, public figures, and regular citizens who work to help keep students, families, schools, and communities safe.

**Undertake projects to help those in need with people from diverse backgrounds.** Helping others is part of the healing process. Working with classmates or members of the community who come from different backgrounds not only enables children to feel that they are making a positive contribution, it also reinforces their sense of commonality with diverse people.

**Discuss historical instances of American intolerance.** Internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor and the backlash against Arab Americans during the Gulf War are obvious examples. Teachers can do lessons in class, but parents can also discuss the consequences of these events and encourage their children to suggest better choices that Americans can make this time.

**Learn about the diverse communities and faiths represented in your area.** Knowledge debunks myths about other people and can humanize other cultures. In school, have children share information about their family or cultural customs to reinforce the notion that all people have special beliefs and rituals.

**Read books with your children or students that address prejudice, tolerance, and hate.** There are many, many stories appropriate for varying age groups that can help children think about and define their feelings regarding these issues. The school or local librarian can make recommendations.

# Ensuring Children's Sense of Safety

Everyone is affected by hate and bias, and all parents and caregivers should be mindful that their children may be subjected to or engaging in anti-AAPI rhetoric related to COVID-19.

- **It is important for parents to understand the effect of stressors and trauma on life functioning.**  
Experiencing stress and racism can contribute to both internal symptoms (such as anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, and isolation) and external behaviors (such as reactivity, aggression, and behavior problems). Children may be concerned about actions or statements that they hear or see in the news. Recent events in their communities or reported in the media may cause children to fear that they or their family and friends may be targeted because of their gender, race, cultural or religious background, sexual orientation, or immigration status.
- **The following represent concerning reactions that you should monitor in your children.**
  - Isolation or refusal to attend school.
  - Withdrawal from peers or social activities.
  - Withdrawal from extracurricular activities at school or in the community.
  - Reports of bullying, harassment, or intimidation in school, in the community, or on social media.
- **You can promote a sense of safety for children by doing the following.**
  - Set limits around television and social media viewing, as too much exposure can increase fears.
  - Provide a consistent structure and routine for children, as this helps to generate a sense of psychological safety.
  - Provide a safe place for your children to talk about their fears.
  - Encourage healthy and safe coping strategies.
  - Emphasize that there are many adults in this country who care deeply about them and who will do all they can to ensure that children and their families are safe and remain together.
  - Maintain contact with your children's teachers, as they can connect children with supports inside the school where they can talk through their feelings and reactions.
  - Seek help immediately from your school's psychologist, counselor, social worker, or nurse if your child is experiencing strong emotional reactions or if you have noticed significant changes to their behavior.
  - Immediately report any instances of bullying, harassment, or discrimination that your child observes or experiences to school administrators.
  - Report hate crimes to local law enforcement and the Southern Poverty Law Center (<https://www.splcenter.org/reporhate>).
- **Adult reactions can influence children's reactions. Children may look to adults to determine how to respond and cope with stress. You can model appropriate coping strategies in the following ways.**
  - Communicate with loved ones about feelings and healthy coping strategies.
  - Take care of your own physical and mental health.
  - Make time to do things you enjoy with family and friends in your community.
  - Access school and community resources. Many schools have parent or cultural liaisons who can help connect families to support in their communities.
  - Help others in your community by referring them to helpful resources.
- **Reinforce and focus on your child's strengths and promote their sense of belonging. All children and families bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge to our society. Build and emphasize those strengths in the following ways.**
  - Help your children find others who allow them to share their knowledge about their origins, customs, and culture.
  - Identify positive activities that can help your children feel they are heard. For example, students can write letters to a local leader expressing their hopes and desires for the community.
  - Identify activities your children can engage in to show support and solidarity for each other and for their local and school communities.

- **Ensure that your child is not participating—whether intentionally or inadvertently—in any harassment or bullying of other** It is important to be aware of and honest about our own children’s behavior and stop behaviors that perpetuate inaccurate perceptions, racism, bias, and harm. Reinforce that such behavior (including speech) is not okay, and help your child identify the source of their feelings/behavior and why it is wrong. Teach them appropriate positive alternatives.
- **Remember that at any time, should you or your children struggle with feelings of stress, please reach out to your school and community organizations for support.** While many families may fear drawing attention to their diverse backgrounds, there are individuals and organizations who want to help. Talk to representatives of your school or local cultural or faith organizations. Other organizations and helpful resources include:
  - American Civil Liberties Union, <https://www.aclu.org/>
  - Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, <http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/>
  - Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations, <https://www.aapcho.org/>
  - Korean American Coalition – Los Angeles, <https://www.kacla.org/>
  - National Association of Asian American Professionals, <https://www.naaap.org/>
  - Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/>
  - Teaching Tolerance, <https://www.tolerance.org/>

*This handout is adapted from the NASP resources [Supporting Vulnerable Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Parents and Promoting Compassion and Acceptance in Crisis](#). Contributors: Sheila Desai, Kathy Cowan, Cixin Wang, Danielle Guttman-Lapin, and Tiffany Lee.*