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Catholic Health Services Offers Tips on Talking to Kids About Coronavirus

ROCKVILLE CENTRE, NY – As part of the effort to contain the spread of coronavirus, local schools have been ordered to close for several weeks. This change in routine leads to many questions from children who want to know why they can't attend school or spend time with their friends.

Providing answers to inquisitive youngsters can be challenging for parents, trying to balance sharing information without unnecessarily alarming their kids.

“With schools closed and many parents working at home temporarily, children will want to know what is causing the changes to what they perceive as normal life,” said Catholic Health Services Chairman of Behavior Health Ronald Brenner, MD. “Also, mobile technology gives many young people access to news and information, which could overwhelm them and cause anxiety.”

The New York State Office of Mental Health offers several suggestions for parents speaking to their kids about coronavirus.

- Think about and rehearse scripts for discussing coronavirus with their children. Kids take cues from caregivers about how anxious they should be about a topic.
- Discuss the situation openly. Avoiding the topic or providing blanket responses may fuel anxiety.
- Don't give more information than is requested. Check to make sure your children understand your response by asking them to repeat back what they have heard and let them know you are open to more questions.
- Help your school-aged child and adolescents set boundaries on their information flow in the same way you are setting your own boundaries. Help them identify factual sources of information and set appropriate intervals to check-in.

- Keep as many routines intact as possible. For children who are out of school, it is important to maintain other familiar routines such as mealtimes and bedtimes.
- Use technology to keep children in touch with a friend or older family members. This allows them to maintain connections while adhering to calls to stay at home to help prevent the spread of coronavirus.
- Encourage physical activity and time outside, where possible. Staying active and having opportunities to be outdoors safely are helpful in mitigating anxiety and building resilience.
- Use this situation as an opportunity to teach distress tolerance skills that will be helpful to your kids in any situation.

For those who wish to speak to a mental health professional, CHS offers a host of services including telepsychiatry, which improves access to psychiatric services for Emergency Department (ED) patients, particularly after normal office hours. The service is currently offered in the EDs of Mercy Medical Center in Rockville Centre, St. Catherine of Siena Medical Center in Smithtown and Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip.

About Catholic Health Services

CHS is an integrated system encompassing some of the region's finest health and human services agencies. With 18,000 employees, 6 acute care hospitals, 3 nursing homes, a home nursing service, hospice, a community-based agency for persons with special needs and a network of physician practices, CHS's high standards have resulted in a 24% market share.

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