

### Let's Talk About Germs!

4/14/2020

Sarah here. Last week, I decided to make a Target run. I thought I was being fairly responsible- getting everything I needed in 1 strategic trip so I could avoid shopping in the coming days. I am definitely not a sit-around-and-do-nothing kind of girl. So, I was sort of happy to be out in the world- I even put on a little makeup. Imagine my surprise when I walked down an aisle and a woman wearing an N-95/respirator mask saw me coming then dove to the side, eyes wide with panic. Did I forget to mention that I have 2 heads, was hacking my lungs out and looked like an extra from The Walking Dead? Oh wait...none of those things are true! And, I knew that none of those things were true. But I did feel a little self-conscious...I mean, at least 95% of all particles should be filtered by her mask yet she avoided me like the plague. I can't imagine what would've happened if I'd cleared my throat...maybe she would've run away screaming?



Yes, this is something that actually happened last week. But it was an exchange between adults...well, it wasn't so much an exchange as a desperate attempt to avoid an exchange...But, I'm an adult. I understand what's going on in the world right now. I understand how viruses are spread and know about germ hygiene. What's more, I have good social skills and am a clinical psychologist, so I understand human emotions and behavior and am relatively unphased by what people do and say...even when it's off-putting or unexpected. I didn't take it personally- I knew it was more about her than it was about me.

Now, instead of 2 adults, imagine that the exchange was between 2 kids- let's call them Breanna and Amanda. What might that look like? Maybe Breanna would yell angrily at Amanda to "stay away from me!" and keep her germs away. Maybe Amanda would intentionally get in Breanna's face just to annoy her (effectively sharing her germs with Breanna). Or, maybe Amanda would be confused about why Breanna said she had germs. Maybe Amanda would run away crying because her feelings were hurt. What do you think would happen later when Breanna went home and told her parents what happened? Would they praise her for what she did and said?

We have no idea exactly how that hypothetical exchange would go. But I'm guessing you can easily imagine something like this happening, and you can also imagine the ways that parents' and kids' germ safety efforts might backfire. Maybe you've even witnessed or heard about an exchange like this happening between kids. I know I have. As parents, it's our job to protect our kids and as adults, it's our responsibility to change our actions to try to keep everyone safe and healthy right now. But even as we try to protect our families and be socially responsible in our actions, it's important that we are aware of what we are modeling for our children.

Teaching our kids to be safe is important. But there are lots of ways to be safe right now. While there are local, state and federal COVID-19 guidelines in place, and national and international recommendations available based on scientific data, the details of exactly how to follow the rules are still a bit fuzzy. That means that you need to decide exactly what being safe and following the rules looks like in your family. This is something for parents to think through together *before* talking with kids. How much interaction do you want your family to have with the outside world while under stay-at-home orders? What are you and aren't you okay with?

Think about likely situations that may arise even as you attempt to socially distance. Seeing the neighbors walking their dog or running into friends playing outside may be more common right now, since people are more likely to be home. How do you want to handle these situations?



Are you okay with neighborly interactions outside, assuming that you can socially distance? Are you comfortable with your child playing with friends outside, inside or both? What about interactions outside of the neighborhood? Some families are using delivery services for all of their basic necessities, while others are limiting shopping trips and still others go shopping frequently to have something to do.

You'll also need to think through how you want to communicate with your kids about germs, social distancing and stay-at-home orders. As the days and weeks pass by, kids *and* adults are becoming increasingly frustrated by their social isolation and may feel increasingly desperate for interaction with the outside world. Think about how you want to deal with the pleas, whining and meltdowns that may arise. And, consider how you want to address your kids' inevitable frustrations with "germs," handwashing and social distancing.

Remember that you'll need to *explicitly* talk with your family about COVID-19, germs, hand hygiene, what your kids are and aren't allowed to do, how to practice polite social distancing and what to say and do in different situations that may arise. If you don't have these direct conversations, your kids will likely make decisions based in part on what other people around them are doing and saying. Yes, that means you and your family. But it also means that your kids may look to the other people they interact with in the world. And, I certainly wouldn't want my daughter to model after the woman who treated me like a pariah in Target!

It isn't always fun to be responsible and it would definitely be easier to be oblivious to our impact on each other and the world. While the current pandemic has turned our lives upside down in so many ways, it is also giving parents lots of opportunities to think about what they want to teach their kids. Each day holds experiences (and stressors) that will allow parents to model for their children. And, since parents have way more time at home with their kids, they have more chances to practice communicating effectively. And, if that isn't an amazing reframe on this whole situation, well, I don't know what is. 😊