



154 S. Livingston Ave., Suite 204, Livingston, N.J. 07039 973-535-5010 [pediatricpotentialsnj.com](http://pediatricpotentialsnj.com)

## Talking to Your Child about Ebola

For the convenience of our parents, we are reprinting the following guide from “The Healthy Minds. Healthy Lives” blog, the American Psychiatric Association’s online resource for mental health issues.

October 20, 2014

15 Tips for Talking to Kids about Ebola

By David Fassler, M.D., Child and adolescent psychiatrist

Parents and teachers may find themselves faced with the challenge of discussing the evolving Ebola epidemic with children. Although these may be difficult conversations, they are also important. There are no “right” or “wrong” ways to talk with kids about Ebola, but here are some suggestions if you need help.

1. **Provide an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions.** At the same time, it’s best not to force children to talk about Ebola unless and until they’re ready.
2. **Answer questions honestly.** Kids will usually know, or eventually find out, if you’re “making things up.” It may affect their trust in you or your reassurances in the future.
3. **Use words and ideas children can understand.** Gear your explanations to the child’s age, language, and developmental level.
4. **Help kids find accurate and up to date information.** Print out Fact Sheets from the CDC, CNN, WHO and kidshealth.org.
5. Be ready to **repeat information and explanations several times.** Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
6. **Acknowledge and validate the child’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions.** Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate. (continued)

7. **Remember that kids often personalize situations.** For example, they may worry about their own safety and the safety of family members. They may also worry about friends or relatives who travel or live far away.

8. **Be comforting, but don't make unrealistic promises.** It's fine to let children know that they are safe in their home or at school. But you can't promise that there will be no cases of Ebola in your state or community.

9. **Let kids know that there are lots of people helping the families affected by Ebola.** This time is a good opportunity to show children that when something scary or bad happens, there are people to help.

10. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They will be very interested in how you react to news about Ebola. They also learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.

11. **Don't let kids watch too much television with frightening images.** The repetition of such scenes can be disturbing and confusing.

12. Children who have experienced serious illness, loss, or other traumatic events in the past are particularly vulnerable to graphic news reports or images of death. These children may need extra support and attention.

13. **Watch for physical symptoms** including headaches and stomachaches. Often times, kids express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

14. Children who are consumed with questions or worry about Ebola should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional care include: ongoing sleep problems, frequent fears about illness or death, or reluctance to leave parents or go to school. If such behaviors continue, ask your child's pediatrician, family physician, or school counselor to help you contact a mental health professional.

15. Although parents and teachers may follow the news and the daily updates with interest and attention, most kids just want to be kids. They may not want to think about what's happening across the country or elsewhere in the world. They'd rather play ball, climb trees, or ride bikes.

Public health emergencies are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel frightened and confused. As parents, teachers, and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding honestly and comfortingly. Fortunately, most children, even those who have experienced loss or illness, are quite resilient. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope with stressful events and experiences.

*David Fassler, M.D., is a child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, Vermont. He is also a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont.*