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**How children come to understand illness and
how to explain COVID-19 to them**

Social Emotional Learning Session 1

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Outline

- Importance of helping children understand significant illness
- How children come to understand illness
- How children *mis*understand illness
- How understanding helps with cooperation with prevention and treatment
- How to explain COVID-19



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Terms for Adults

- Pandemic – a disease prevalent (widely spread) throughout an entire country(ies), continent(s), or the whole world (global pandemic)
- Coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19: ‘CO’ stands for ‘corona,’ ‘VI’ for ‘virus,’ and ‘D’ for disease
- The virus that causes COVID-19 is SARS coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)
- Recommend referring to “COVID” and “the virus/germ that causes COVID” with children



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Inform Children About Illnesses that Affect Them

- Even very young children can sense when something is wrong and upsetting family members
- Knowing something bad happened but not knowing what or how to protect yourself is very frightening
- Children are better able to deal with situation if they feel they understand it
- Amount of information depends in part on age, conceptual understanding, personality & coping style
- No matter how old, best to start by stating in simple, direct, and clear terms basic facts
- Concentrate on relevant information



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Problem with Young Children's Beliefs

- Result in guilt and shame associated with illness; children may view treatment as form of punishment
- Made worse by threats – makes them less likely to share symptoms or cooperate with treatment



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Subsequent Developmental Stages

- Begin to view illness as contagious; initially overextended to non-contagious illness
- 9-10 years (developmental age): germs must first enter body
- 12-13 years: begin to appreciate interactions between host and agent in cause of disease and recovery
- Adolescence: associate apparently unrelated symptoms or different stages of illness; more able to understand how many treatments work



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Children (and adults) May have Limited Understanding

- Limited information – *they weren't told about it*
- Misinformation – *they were told incorrect information*
- Misinterpretations or misconceptions – *they were told correct information, but misunderstood it* (either because they got the facts wrong or they understood the facts but didn't understand an underlying concept)



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Overgeneralizations

- As you explain COVID-19, they may over-generalize to other illnesses
- Correct information often does not correct pre-existing misconceptions or over-generalizations – can hold conflicting information as true



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Explaining Covid-19 Spread

- Caused by germ (only the COVID germ causes COVID) that can be spread from a person who is infected when infected person coughs, sneezes or breathes on another person
- When people cough, sneeze or breathe, they spread a small amount of water from inside mouth and airways where germ is found if infected
- When this gets on other people's hands and they touch their mouth, nose or eyes, they can allow germ to get into their body through these openings



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Explaining Covid-19 Spread and Preventing Illness

- People infected with COVID germ may have cough, fever or trouble breathing, but many don't feel ill but can still spread the germ to others
- That's why we wear a mask, keep farther apart from people and wash our hands carefully before we touch our food, or our mouth, nose or eyes
- That way people who are infected don't spread the germ to others and we don't catch the germ



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Reassurance Related to Covid-19

- Many different illnesses can cause cough, fever, or trouble breathing – most of these are not serious
- Once someone has recovered fully from COVID, they no longer can spread the germ to others
- We now have vaccines that can keep people from getting ill with COVID



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Questions and Resources

- Email SpecialEducation@schools.nyc.gov for information or assistance.
- Visit the NYC DOE's website for learn at home resources

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/learn-at-home/activities-and-supports/special-education-supports>



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