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THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

# AAP News

## **How to discuss Ebola with your children**

Mary McGrath

*AAP News* originally published online October 7, 2014;

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**Breaking News**

October 7, 2014

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## AAP News Parent Plus

INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

### How to discuss Ebola with your children

If you have any exposure to news media, you've probably heard a lot about the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. But there is a big difference between the way kids and adults react to the onslaught of information about this disease. While it often is challenging to talk with children about unsettling current events, it's important that your child receive accurate information from you, instead of rumors from their peers.

You might not know all the answers to your child's questions, but background knowledge of Ebola can help develop the conversation.

Ebola is a rare viral infection occurring mostly in five Western African countries. Symptoms include fever, severe headache, stomach pain and unexplained bleeding or bruising. The virus is spread through direct contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person, but disinfectant can prevent transmission. On average, about half of the people with the disease die.

David J. Schonfeld, M.D., FAAP, pediatrician-in-chief and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, suggests the following when discussing Ebola with your child:

- Consider your child's maturity level and coping style. Generally, older children are more ready for information than younger

ones. And like adults, some children need more information to handle issues, while others worry more if they have a lot of information.

- Ask your children what they have already heard and understand about Ebola. Ask them what other information they would like, and use any misinformation they have given you to guide your responses.
- Be factual and honest. Help children understand the differences between the common illnesses they have encountered and rare, localized diseases like Ebola. It isn't helpful or effective to provide graphic details.
- If you are unsure of an answer, explain to your child that you don't know. If it is still of interest, offer to look the answer up for them, or, if the question is suitable, help them to look it up.
- Remain calm and confident. Your children notice your attitude. Don't tell children they "shouldn't worry." Rather, support them as they learn to overcome their fears.

— *Mary McGrath*

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