



(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/>)



Ending The Stigma Of COVID-19 At Home So It Doesn't Become The New 'Cooties'

BY JOSEPH WILSON

PHOTO © HANNI/TWENTY20

Before schools across the country closed their doors, there was a new taunt making the rounds on the playground of my daughter's school. "Coronavirus! Coronavirus!" was the new version of the "Cooties!" insult that I remember from my youth. In class, whenever a classmate was away, someone would always chime in with "Coronavirus! Coronavirus!" even if the kid was only at a dentist appointment.

In the first weeks of 2020, kids in my daughter's class started to trade snippets of information they heard from their parents' conversations — trying, much like the rest of us, to put together a complete picture of this emerging threat. They knew it was a disease. And more gravely, it was something their parents were frightened of. In the eyes of a child this is an enormous accomplishment.

"Certain words can be harmful and the ultimate way to attach stigma to certain people — I make sure to remind my kids of that."

As such, “Coronavirus!” makes it the perfect verbal weapon for a child. It is a new, exotic-sounding word that represents fear, danger and the unknown. Asking my daughter what her classmates hoped to accomplish with such name-calling draws a blank stare.

“Some people think it’s cool,” she says.

“Coronavirus is cool?” I ask, not sure if I understand.

“Well, not cool, but...”

“...fascinating?” I offer.

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s important. We could die.”

Well, that’s certainly true, I think to myself.

Their teacher tried to set the record straight. “It’s only in China,” she said, a statement that may have been true when she said it in January.

“It could come here!” one said.

“Aaaah! We could die,” said another.

Out on the playground the children continued to make sense of this new spectre of death by turning it into a game of tag.

“Maybe I have it,” said one. “I could infect everybody!” he said, chasing after the nearest classmate amidst screeches and laughter. Transmitting death through a simple touch is an intoxicating superpower for a child to imagine. That is, until one child realized he could give the tagger a double-dose of coronavirus by engaging in the ethically dubious practice known in tag circles as “touch-backs.”

A great place to start talking about this with kids is teaching the right way to wash hands — check out this cute poster

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/handwashing-poster-covid-19-kids>)!

“You’ve got to try and touch someone without them touching you back,” my daughter patiently explains to me. These types of games play on the human tendency to divide the world into binaries, into categories of clean/dirty; pure/impure or safe/unsafe.

At elementary school this often manifests as an in-group/out-group structure and needs to be watched carefully by teachers to ensure it doesn’t devolve into bullying.

Certain words can be harmful and the ultimate way to attach stigma to certain people

– I make sure to remind my kids of that.

Tag Will Be Just Tag Again — Perhaps

That said, playing tag is fun and it allows children to process, in their own way, what exactly their parents are talking about. Under present conditions of physical distancing, though, tag is certainly not an option. Children are also getting more direct information from their parents as they self-isolate together.

When schools open again, it will be interesting to see whether “Coronavirus!” will still be used as a playground taunt, or whether the reality has struck too close to home for kids who might have had friends or relatives affected. When vague fears coalesce into real fears they’re not so much fun to play with anymore.

SHARE



You Might Also Like

No related entries found.
