

Guidelines for Conversations with Elementary Students about the Swine Flu Outbreak

Often when students are concerned about something they see in the news, they're reluctant to bring it up unless we do. As adults we often forget that children often wait for our permission or encouragement to talk about things that are on their minds. At the same time, there is good reason not to needlessly alarm students about whether the swine flu will become an epidemic or pandemic. So where is the middle ground?

Begin by find questions you can ask students in order to find out whether this is a worry for them. For elementary students, there are a variety of ways to open such a conversation, such as:

- *Let's talk about what we all did over the weekend. Who has time when your family sits together to have a meal? What kinds of things do you all talk about when you're together?*
- *Let's talk about this past year. What are the things we have heard on the news this past year? Some things might be things that make us excited or happy, and some might be things that worry us. What are some of the big things that you can name? (New president, things like that). Put their comments in two columns, "excited" and "worried" might be two such headings, but others would do. Then ask students to suggest things that have happened and into which column they belong. Help students recognize that some things that worry one child might not worry another. We all have different coping strategies and different kinds of support that get us through difficult times. This can then be the springboard for*
 - *Who do you talk with when things are exciting or happy?*
 - *Who do you talk with when you are worried or sad?*
 - *What do kids do when they think they are the only one worried about something? (And here, you want to let kids talk about how they might keep it inside, but in the end, you want to reinforce that you care about more than just their school work, and that when they are worried about something, you want them to tell you so you can help them make the best plan possible for taking care of their worries.)*

If a child brings up the spreading of the swine flu, some questions and comments might include:

- If you're wondering about that, I bet others in the room are as well. Some problems we can take care of ourselves. Some problems are too big for us to handle alone. What do you do when you are worried about something that is more than you can handle alone? (Let kids generate ideas, Reinforce all of them for contributing, but clarify and reinforce those that are most likely to be helpful.)
 - *One thing to remember is that really smart people are keeping track of this and will help us to keep it from spreading as much as possible.*
 - *Another thing to remember is that we get through these things by being helpful to one another, and that the adults in your world are watching out to take good care of you.*
 - *The school will be sending information home to your parents for lots of reasons. Sometimes we send a letter home for something that is just an announcement or information. Sometimes it is about something that is cause for concern. If there is anything your parents need to know, whether it is about this or something else, our school sends information home so your parents can know what to do.*

And then be sure to end with a statement that encouraged kids to let you know when they're worried.

- *Sometimes I'm paying so much attention to teaching that, if one of you is worried, I might not realize that. So it is really important that, even if I don't ask the right questions to help you bring it up, when something is worrying you, what are you supposed to do?"* And help the kids answer that they're supposed to come tell you.



Guidelines for Conversations with Middle and High School Students about the Swine Flu Outbreak

For starters, it is critical that we are open and honest with students. That doesn't mean giving them great detail or telling frightening aspects that aren't appropriate for their age or perhaps are an overstatement of what is happening in your region vs. other places. Always, though, students deserve our honesty and our respect for their questions and concerns; now especially. Too, students often wait for our permission or encouragement to bring up things that worry them.

Anything written in this guideline is based on current data, which is that all people who have contracted swine flu in the US have survived. CMI will continue to put out updates if the situation becomes more serious, but if any of this is outdated by the time you receive it, go to our web site to see if there is something more current. At this point, this is an awareness level guideline on how you might appropriately allay exaggerated student fears and still acknowledge that, at least in some places in the US, there is cause for concern.

Although with younger students, we often use probing questions to find out whether they're aware of something that might be worrisome, with middle and high school students, we can be more direct. Talking about what is in the news is something that is a part of the school process - by middle and high school, student awareness of news is something we now want to foster. It makes a difference how you'll approach this, however, if you live in a state that has or hasn't had a swine flu case confirmed. So we might look at a measured approach. Because youth have a limited span of history for life experience, and because many come from homes that have a variety of kinds of stressors and dysfunction, we can know that some students will likely have an exaggerated fear compared to others. At this point, helping students feel reassured that what can be done *is* being done is critical.

If your region has had confirmed cases, you need to refer to your state health department or state department of education web sites. They will be giving specific instructions on decisions you'll need to make both if your school has a confirmed case and if you have a student with matching symptoms while awaiting confirmation. This will be a time to consider communications to parents and education of kids on recognition of symptoms and steps to take to limit contagion.

If your region has not had confirmed cases, consider an awareness-raising level of conversation at this point. If all students have health class, this would be one obvious place for this to occur, but if not, it will depend on how your student days are scheduled and whether you have home room, etc. Choose a time when you can be certain that all students are included. Choose wording that works and is authentic for you as a teacher and for your students.

Conversation starters could include:

- *Let's generate the list of news stories that you are aware of... and list them on the board. Or you could skip this point and the next two and go directly to bringing up the flu.*
- *Which of these are cause for concern and which are not? Check in front of those that are.*
- *Let's get more specific about our concern for each one of these. For some, like the war, male students may be concerned about having to go to war. Convey your understanding of each student's concern. Encourage them to talk. Ask follow-up questions about each as you go.*
- *Then, if they don't bring up the swine flu outbreak, you bring it up. *Something that caught my eye this weekend is the coverage of the swine flu outbreak. How many of you knew about that?* If some respond to having known about it, you can ask each to share something they've heard about it. This is a time to clarify, demystify, and bring calm. Some students may have exaggerated fears. You might acknowledge that with something like, *"We all worry about different kinds of things. Sometimes some kids put on a really brave front or tease others**



because they don't want to admit that we're worried, too. Sometimes when we listen to other students' ideas on coping, we realize we can worry less by using their ideas."

- *So what do we need to know about the flu outbreak? Things to help them discover by your questioning might include:*
 - *How will we know if we're at risk? We need to pay enough attention that we know if there are cases in our area, especially in our school.*
 - *Who are the really smart people who are watching this and giving us information and help? The CDC sends out information to state and local health departments, who will be letting us know what we need to do in our area.*
 - *What will happen if we do have flu here? Specific measures will be put into place if they become needed (such as families staying at home with their sick one and nobody leaving so no one else gets exposed, more reminders about hand-washing, etc.).*
- *How much do we need to be concerned? (This will depend on whether you are in a region that has had confirmed cases, and that the following is still true.) If you are in a region without cases:*
 - *One thing we know is that so far, in the US, everyone who has gotten it has had a case of flu just like any other, in terms of getting well again.*
 - *(If they know about the deaths in Mexico) We don't have information yet that helps us know why people in Mexico died - whether they were the old and sick who got it and had other reasons that their bodies couldn't handle it. Most people who have contracted it in Mexico have survived, and so far in the US, people are surviving it.*
 - *We don't know how this will go. That is the nature of diseases. But let's see - anybody ever heard of SARS? (Some will have been too young to have even heard of it, so you will likely have to give a recap of it - that it was a virulent strain of a contagious disease that was contained and stopped entirely by quarantining people as soon as they were diagnosed.)*

You might spend a few minutes with kids generating ideas about times that they've really worried that something would be worse than it was, and also times that they haven't paid attention to something (like how far behind they were in a class) and have had it turn out different than they expected. The lesson with this one is that right now, it is too soon to know how this will progress. We just don't know.

What is counter-productive in conversations on this:

- Dismissing their fears: *It won't come here. You don't have to worry about that.*
- Allowing laughter at someone's contribution. All students need to be respectful of one another.
- Only having information go one way. It is just as important for kids to contribute to the conversation as it is for us to be giving them clear information. The only way we know what is really bothering them is to listen to them!

If there appears to be value in an updated conversation guide, CMI will continue to post updates on our web site at <www.cmionline.org>.

