



## Family Matters

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# New Book Provides Children with Clear Answers about Coronavirus

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**Pediatric Nursing**  
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**A**rlen Gaines and Meredith Polsky are social workers and authors of the award-winning “I Have a Question About” picture book series that seeks to help all children, including children with special needs, and their caregivers, navigate challenging topics in a straight-forward manner (see Figure 1). Their latest book addresses tough questions, fear, and anxiety about coronavirus. *I Have a Question about Coronavirus: Clear Answers for All Kids* is available as an e-book, free of charge, on their website ([www.ihaveaquestionbook.com](http://www.ihaveaquestionbook.com)).

In the conversation that follows, social worker Micah Saviet, MSW, LMSW, talks with Gaines and Polsky about their new book and how parents, caregivers, and children can manage coronavirus and navigate the challenging transition of schools beginning to re-open.

### Saviet: What was your thinking process behind developing and writing *I Have a Question about Coronavirus*?

**Polsky:** When the pandemic started, a lot of people were concerned about how children, in particular, were going to navigate this brand new world that they were suddenly thrust into. Arlen and I talked about what we could contribute.

Back in March of 2020, it was so unclear what was going to happen. However, what was really clear was that there were all these terms, ideas, and concerns that nobody had talked about before, and that felt overwhelming, such as “flattening the curve,” “quarantining,” and “social distancing.”

**Micah Saviet, MSW, LMSW, is a Social Worker in Clinical Practice, a Researcher, and the Director, Springer Institute, Cheverly, MD.**

**Editor’s Note:** Meredith Polsky has also written other very short visual stories for children about coronavirus, including one about returning to school. These can be accessed on her website (<https://www.meredith-polsky.com/picture-stories>).

Saviet, M. (2021). New book provides children with clear answers about coronavirus. *Pediatric Nursing*, 47(4), 198-199, 207.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, school.

Arlen and I realized that we had a really strong template for helping children navigate difficult situations. Our books take a child through a process of asking questions that many children would have in those various circumstances. Our books also address the fact that some questions have answers and some don’t. Most importantly, we recognize that it’s so difficult to accept when our questions don’t have an answer.

We wanted to put something out into the world during those early months of the pandemic. We hoped a book could potentially help families navigate a situation that nobody’s really ever had to navigate before. One thing that’s really important to note is we did not approach the topic as public health experts (which we’re not!). We really have encouraged people to turn to the scientists, turn to the doctors on the medical side of this.

**Saviet:** *I Have a Question about Coronavirus* is open access and available for free from your website in English, Spanish, and Greek. What was behind this decision?

**Polsky:** Publishing a hardcover book takes about a year. We wanted to get something out quickly to add value and also didn’t want to profit off of the pandemic. We were grateful that our publisher said ‘yes’ to the free download.

The **Family Matters** series focuses on issues, information, and strategies relevant to working with families of pediatric patients. To suggest topics, obtain author guidelines, or to submit queries or manuscripts, contact Co-Editors Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, PCC; or Deborah Dokken, MPA, via email at [pnjrnl@ajj.com](mailto:pnjrnl@ajj.com).

Arlen and I have children of our own. So we were surrounded by our children and other children in our communities who were asking many questions, and we were able to write the book quickly.

**Gaines:** The translation of the book into a few different languages came about through the kindness of strangers. We really worked closely with the translators because they wanted to make sure they were conveying the right sentiment. This was amazing, and we were really grateful to offer the book as a resource in a few different languages.

**Saviet:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has released updated guidelines for COVID prevention at K-12 schools (CDC, 2021). What advice do you have for children and their families who are worried about changing to this “new reality” of going back to school?

**Gaines:** We always defer to the CDC, scientists, and physicians for guidance. Our focus is on the feelings that families and children have, and there is tremendous anxiety on all sides. What we like to think about is how can we best support children and families around these feelings and what strategies can be helpful. Really opening up lines of communication in the way that fits for the child. Making sure they feel like they can share what’s happening, using honest and clear language, and circling back and talking about things again and again are all important guidelines to keep in mind. Because children process little bits of information at a time, we want to keep those lines of communication open during this time of transition when some kids are going back to school.

**Polsky:** I think one of the challenges for kids who are returning to in-person school is that there’s this image in their mind that if they’re going back to school, it’s going to look like it looked the last time they were in school. In many instances, that won’t be the case. So the more we can give them a picture of what the classroom is going to look like, what the school is going to look like, what their day is going to look like, and overall the more information we can give them concretely about what to expect the better, and more likely to decrease anxiety. This is especially true for younger kids and kids with special needs. So much of what we do is preparing kids for what to expect. What is important now is to work with children around flexibility and what to do when things aren’t going how we planned.

**Saviet:** What are some specific strategies that families and caregivers can use to help kids and themselves during the transition of going back to school?

**Polsky:** First, many children process in pictures and not just in words. Helping kids know what to expect through visual cues and schedules is helpful. It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. The goal is for children to have things they can reference on their own to develop self-sufficiency and resilience. So using visuals when dealing with new challenges or new transitions is helpful.

Second, it’s important to help children regulate their sensory system. This might look like a quiet corner in the home that children can retreat to and gather themselves. It may also be a fidget tool or a blanket. Anything that can

**Figure 1.**  
**Books in the “I Have a Question about” Series**

- *I Have a Question about Death: Clear Answers for All Kids, Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Other Special Needs* (2017)
- *I Have a Question about Divorce: A Book for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Other Special Needs* (2018)
- *I Have a Question about Cancer: Clear Answers for All Kids, Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Other Special Needs* (2019)
- *I Have a Question about Coronavirus: Clear Answers for All Kids* (2020)

Source: [www.ihaveaquestionbook.com](http://www.ihaveaquestionbook.com)

help children regulate from a sensory perspective is really important right now as well.

Lastly, we want to remember that for many children with special needs, and many children in general, there are a number of important support people in their lives other than immediate family members. These might include a mental health therapist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, or other people in their lives. To the greatest extent possible, we want to involve those people to help prepare our children for transitions because everybody brings a different perspective to challenges. Each of these professionals in a child’s life has strategies that hopefully have proven to be successful for that child in terms of coping with different things. So bringing an individual child’s team together is important. I think parents can feel very isolated and alone in some situations, but remembering there are other people who can help support us and our children is really important.

**Gaines:** I would add that whenever we’re thinking about the best ways we can support children and teens, we need to also support parents and caregivers. The more parents and caregivers care for themselves, the more effectively they can support the children in their lives.

When we step back and look at what this past year has meant, there has been so much grief and loss. For example, loved ones have died, there have been changes in routines, changes in work situations, financial stressors for many families, loss of seeing friends, loss of being able to travel, and being able to do activities that you’ve enjoyed. I don’t think we can talk about this pandemic without talking about loss.

**Saviet:** Children and their families can have a range of emotions about returning to school. Some kids may feel excited to get back to school while others may feel nervous and scared. What advice do you have about coping with these different feelings?

**Polsky:** As children are starting to go back to school, it’s a little bit of a return to normal, but also not normal. I think the first thing to really pay attention to is what your child might be feeling. Some children are really good at labeling and expressing their emotions, and some children will express them in other ways. We need to remember that behavior is communication, and we really need to think

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about the ways our children are acting. Sometimes we see developmental regressions among children due to adverse experiences. It's important to think about what might be behind those behaviors.

**Saviet: What signs or cues might parents notice in their children indicate they might need to involve a therapist for additional support and guidance?**

**Polsky:** A few important things to be mindful of include children who have lost interest in things that they were previously interested in, children who are really having a hard time motivating to attend classes or get schoolwork done, children who are really retreating or not interacting much with the members of their household, and excessive crying or mood swings. Additionally, parents, caregivers, and anyone else should seek immediate care and counsel about any indications that a child is saying anything about or planning to hurt themselves or other people.

**Saviet: What kind of feedback have you gotten from children, caregivers, or others about your book about COVID?**

**Gaines:** We've received a lot of positive feedback. People were really grateful. We were happy to hear that a lot of teachers, therapists, and school principals from around the country read it aloud to children over Zoom. I think people felt it was a helpful resource, and also that it helped open up a conversation and provided a structure for talking with kids about what was happening.

**Polsky:** This book really did go global. We heard feedback from many corners of the world. It feels good to be able to make a difference and provide a resource. We've been living in this pandemic just like everyone else, and this is the little piece that we could contribute during this challenging time. ■■

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### Reference

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). *Operational strategy for K-12 schools through phased prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>