

Dealing with the Coronavirus Outbreak:

Top Tips for talking about Covid-19 with children and young people

Whilst we all work hard to follow precautionary measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, there are some simple steps we can take to protect the emotional wellbeing of our children and young people. Many parents may also be wondering how to talk to children about COVID-19 in a child-friendly way. Here are some top tips:

Don't avoid talking about it or pretend it's not happening: Children are aware of the virus and are likely to have some concerns about this. Avoiding the topic can cause unnecessary anxiety for your children. Instead, give them clear and honest facts at a level they can understand.

Be your child's trusted news source: Your aim is to ensure your children feel informed and get fact based information that is developmentally appropriate for their age. Filter the content they receive to ensure the information they are getting is informed and factual.

- Educate yourself on the facts about Coronavirus & COVID-19 from the official government site (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>) as it's easy for adults to be pulled into reading biased or unhelpful information.
- CBBC Newsround is a good source of news content for over 10's, but watch it together so you can discuss what is heard.
- Try not to have the news on the television or radio too much and try to encourage your child not to search for further information on the internet, as misinformation is likely to raise anxiety.
- Pay attention to happy news stories. Make it a daily routine to look up happy news stories on Google.
- Whenever there is something scary in the news, look for the helpers. So, rather than focusing on the virus, focus on the nurses and doctors who are working really hard to help people get better. Look at the scientists who are working really hard to come up with a cure. Look at the cleaners who are working really hard to keep everywhere clean and germ-free. Emphasise that everyone is working together to try to sort this problem out.
- Projecting an air of confidence and modeling positive reactions in times of uncertainty can help children and young people feel more confident.

Provide developmentally appropriate information: Try not to volunteer too much information as this could be overwhelming for your child, or offer false promises. Instead a more contained approach is to try and answer your child's questions, giving them the information that they want to know. Do your best to answer clearly and honestly. It's okay to not know everything, being available to your child is what matters.

Listen to their worries and validate their feelings: Don't dismiss your child's worries even if they seem unrealistic. Remind them that it's OK to feel worried. Be curious about what it is that they are specifically worried about and try to guide them to facts and things that they can do to stay safe, for example:

- If they're worried about their grandparent's health, emphasise the precautions being taken to keep them safe like social distancing and hand washing.
- If they're worried about missing friends, problem solve ideas such as arranging Skype calls or playing a game online with them.
- If they're worried about Covid-19 generally, problem solve ways to help other people such as, making a small donation to the local food bank, phoning an elderly neighbour or relative, drawing a rainbow to put in the window to letting other people know you are thinking of them. Helping other people can release feel good chemicals in our brain and make us feel more in control.
- If your child is worried about being at home, make a list of the positives such as more family time, more time with pets at home etc.

Implement Worry Time: If the worry is constant and doesn't reduce, set aside 10-15 minutes a day where they can talk to you about all their worries. They can write their worries down in a notebook, on post-it notes or on a phone throughout the day and then during Worry Time, encourage them to look through and think about the worries they have written down. They might be able to use problem solving to find solutions to some of them or they may just want to talk about them. Once Worry Time is up, stop thinking about the worries by using relaxation or distraction techniques such as controlled breathing, some simple stretches, reading a favourite story or having a bath. If they haven't managed to go through all of the worries, you can carry them over to Worry Time the next day.

Empower them by teaching them the things you can do to stay safe: Children and young people feel empowered when they know what to do to keep themselves safe and how to stay healthy. Remind children they are taking care of themselves by washing their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (or the length of two 'happy birthday' songs), before they eat, when they come in from outside, after blowing their nose, coughing, sneezing or using the bathroom. The government guidelines contain more information on this.

Stick to a routine to maintain normality: With the majority of children not in school, it's important to stay rooted in routines and predictability. Take care of the basics just like you would during school holidays. Structured days with regular mealtime and bedtimes are an essential part of keeping kids happy and healthy. Keep activities varied in between, to balance out the day and keep things interesting.

- When possible involve your child in planning a new schedule and routine. An unstructured day or routine is likely to be more stressful than having a new timetable which they can follow.
- If your child needs to be at home, leaving the day unstructured is likely to be far more stressful than creating a new timetable to follow.
- Factor in time for activities that your child enjoys and try to find alternatives to activities that they are missing out on in their usual routine. For example, if they enjoy going to chess club, they could instead play chess online.
- Try to help your child stay in touch with the people they are used to seeing. This can be friends, family, teachers. Discuss being safe online with your child and supervise them and know who they are talking to.
- Remember to prioritise down-time for your child. This is essential for all children but even more so for those who have sensory needs. Having this time is just as important for parents – you might also want to use this as a time for you to relax, or if you have another time in the day to relax, this can be a time for you to complete your own tasks.

Try to maintain a sense of childhood for them: Children are easily absorbed into things they enjoy. There is no reason for them to stop doing these things, which will offer a healthy distraction from their worries. Some families are enjoying creating Coronavirus wish lists of activities they can be doing now during social isolation (e.g. *make a video for a relative, learn how to play chess, organise my room, have a phone call with my best friend once a week, bake a cake*), as well as a wish list for when things return to normal (e.g. *sleepover with best friend, family picnic, visit the national history museum, go to flip out*). This will remind your child that things will return to normal.

Love and attention: Children need adult's love and attention during difficult times. It's likely that you will be feeling pressure to manage different demands at the moment, and because of this it can be easy to forget that sometimes all your child needs is to feel loved, and to know that you are available to them.

Above all, keep talking to them: Tell your child that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more but for now, they should get on with day-to-day living, with your support. Let them know that the lines of communication are going to be open. It may be helpful to say something along the lines of 'Even though we don't have the answers to everything right now, know that once we know more, we will let you know too'.

Look after yourself: Many adults are also feeling stressed out right now, and that's normal and understandable. In the rush to make sure your child feels safe and calm, we often forget to ask ourselves 'how am I feeling?'.

- It's important to notice and manage our own anxiety. If you feel yourself getting anxious, stop, sit down and take a moment to try and calm yourself. Relax yourself in ways that

work for you. For some people taking deep breaths and gentle stretching can help as you are may be holding your body in a tense position.

- Try to find some time for yourself (for example, before your child/children wake-up or after bed-time) even if it is only for a brief amount of time. During this time do something that makes you feel good – this might be a relaxing activity, connecting with family/friends virtually, spending time with you partner, or doing something that you find fulfilling and enjoyable.
- If you are stressed, reach out to others as it is likely that other parents who you know will also be feeling this way.
- If you can't talk to your children because it is too stressful or upsetting, then delegate someone else close that can.
- Be realistic and kind to yourself: Working, parenting, and teaching are three different jobs so doing more than one of these tasks is bound to feel tough. Try to avoid setting unrealistic expectations on yourself – instead, do the best that you can.