

Advice and resources for parents and carers in talking to children about Coronavirus and school closures

Derbyshire Educational Psychology Service

With the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the planned closures of schools from Friday many families will be facing uncertainty and stress. This may include worries about how to talk to children or teenagers about what is happening and why. Some children may also be experiencing increased anxiety or worry about what the virus might mean for themselves, their family and friends.

This guidance aims to provide some information about:

- Ways to talk to your child about coronavirus and school closures
- Ideas for reducing or managing levels of anxiety
- Further resources and websites that might be helpful

Talking to your child

It is important that you talk to your child about what is happening. You are the best source of information but also reassurance for your child. Depending on their age the majority of children will be aware of the virus, even if this is just through discussions around increased handwashing at school. Older children and teenagers are likely to have noticed changes in other's behaviour and may have accessed information from teachers, via social media and peers. Children need age-appropriate information that is factual and helps them make sense of what is happening and why.

You will need to tailor the information you give based on your child's age or any additional needs that they have. You may find it easier to watch a short clip about the virus together, such as the one from Newsround, as a basis for discussion <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51861089>

If your child has additional needs the National Autistic Society has information on their website about talking to a person with autism about what is happening. There is also a link to a social story about the virus written by Carol Gray <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>

Mencap have produced an easy to read guide with visuals <https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Information%20about%20Coronavirus%20ER%20UPDATED%20130320%20SD%20editsAH.pdf>

The National Association of Therapeutic Parents has information and resources that adoptive parents and foster carers may find particularly helpful <https://www.facebook.com/Naotp.worldwide/> including, for members, Virtual Listening Circles

It is important that children have space to ask questions. Adults don't have all the answers and it is important to be honest and say 'I don't know' if this is the case.

Children need to know:

- Coronavirus is a new virus that can make people ill
- People who are ill with the virus usually develop a cough and/or a high temperature
- Most people have a short illness and get better
- Some people get very ill and may need to go into hospital for additional help and support
- Most people will recover
- A few people will not recover and will die

Children also need to know that there are practical steps that they can take to keep themselves and the people that they love safe and healthy. This includes:

- Washing their hands
- Following the 'catch-it, bin it, kill it' advice for coughs and sneezes

The NHS Handwashing song and video may be useful for younger children and can be found on YouTube. A range of other videos can be found at: <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/life-skills/self-care/going-to-the-toilet/hand-washing/> including the Germ Buster animation.

School closures

The majority of children will not be in school for the foreseeable future. This will be unsettling for some children, particularly those who like structure and routine and those that find change hard. Children may also be upset about not seeing friends and familiar adults, such as teachers and teaching assistants, on a daily basis. Older teenagers who have been working towards examinations may be confused and worried about their future plans. Closing schools also has an impact on parents and carers who may find themselves having to juggle work and childcare. In addition you may be worried about the prospect of how you will cope with your child or children at home for a long period of time, particularly if they have additional needs, high levels of anxiety and/or challenging behaviour.

Children need to know:

- Schools are closing to help stop the spread of the virus

Schools will be in touch with parents directly to explain their plans for providing work during closure. In general you should:

- Ensure that there is a balance within the day for your children to complete school work, exercise, have fun and play and spend time relaxing
- Provide structure – some children will benefit from the use of a visual timetable so they know what is happening and when
- Remember that you can only do your best in difficult circumstances. Your child's emotional wellbeing is the priority. Make the day work for everyone involved
- Learning, especially for young children, is best done through play and practical activities such as baking together. Sing songs, laugh, draw and paint
- Make use of resources and ideas available online, including those on the BBC.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/genres/learning/primary/all>
- Use technology to help maintain children's friendships with peers. Younger children will need supervision to ensure that they are safe if online

If your child is still going to school

The government has asked schools to remain open to provide support for some children and families. The school will already have been in touch if this includes your child. Parents and carers should talk to their children about why they are going into school when their peers are staying at home. Children will need reassurance and support to understand any changes that are going to take place, for instance in terms of staffing. Some children may find it harder than normal to separate from you at the beginning of the day. Children with additional needs may require extra support to help them cope with changes to their typical school day. Children need to know:

- Schools are staying open for some children whose parents are keyworkers including those that help others buy food and those that keep people safe and healthy
- Other children will be attending because the government has decided that school is the best place for them to be
- Some schools are joining together to provide provision. This means that they might be going to school in another place for a little while
- There will be familiar adults and children for them to play with
- There will be fewer children
- The day might be different to what they are used to, there will be fun activities as well as some learning. The adults will explain what is happening each day when they arrive
- They will get snacks and lunch as usual
- These changes are temporary and things will get back to normal, we just don't know when at the moment

Further guidance about talking to your child about the coronavirus can be found at:

The Unicef website <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

The YoungScot website (good for teenagers to access)
<https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus>

The British Psychological Society website <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/talking-children-aboutcoronavirus>

Young Minds website <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/talking-to-your-child-about-coronavirus/> this has details about a parent helpline you can access if you are supporting a child or young person who is particularly anxious

Supporting wellbeing

There are lots of positive steps that you can take as a family to reduce anxiety and support your child's resilience during this difficult time. Your child may be understandably worried about coronavirus and the changes that are taking place, over which they may feel they have little or no control. You may also be feeling anxious about what is happening, and how you can best support your child. Children will look to their parents or carers for reassurance and it is important that you look after yourself and take time for self-care – even a few minutes a day will make a difference. Top tips for supporting wellbeing include:

1. Stick to as many of your normal routines as possible so that children feel safe. This might include routines around meals and bedtimes
2. Plan in enjoyable activities that you can do together. Activities that support connection are particularly important. This could include: reading a favourite story together, playing a game of the child's choice and letting them take the lead, baking, singing or drawing together. Young minds parenting hub has some excellent ideas for short activities with your child <https://youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes/>
3. For older children and teenagers plan a daily 'check-in' time when you can catch up on what has been happening, watch a TV programme together or have a chat. The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has produced a video for young people to support their mental health during <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME5IZn4-BAk&feature=youtu.be>
4. Encourage children to stay connected with their friends and extended family through Skype, WhatsApp or Google Hangout. Research shows that being able to see a person, rather than simply hear them has a positive effect
5. Take time for you. Get out for a walk if it is possible to do so, sit in the garden or access one of the free resources designed to support wellbeing. Headspace are providing resources: Weathering the Storm that have been made available to everyone free of charge. These include meditations, sleep and movement exercises. Find out more at <https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>
6. Limit children's access to rolling news and constant updates about the virus. It is better if information is filtered through you or, for older children and teenagers accessed via an official website, such as Public Health www.GOV.UK

Further ideas and guidance can be found at:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/looking-after-your-mental-health-while-self-isolating/> (for teenagers)

<https://www.mindheart.co/descargables> a downloadable workbook for children 7 years and under to help explain the virus and offer support and reassurance

<https://www.camhsnorthderbyshire.nhs.uk/covid19>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnANLAcPRZ4&feature=youtu.be> a video for parents and carers from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families about how they can best help children and young people manage their mental health and wellbeing during disruption cause by Coronavirus