

How to Talk to Children about the Coronavirus:

Firstly it is important to remember that we are all unique and will all respond differently to the challenges that we are currently facing, and this is no different for our children. Hold in mind that you will know your child better than anyone else, and will be able to adapt the conversation to best meet their needs and level of understanding. Our top tip is to **let the children take the lead**, sometimes we may be feeling that our children are aren't coping well, but this can be our own anxieties reflecting back to us. Let's limit our children's exposure to negative news stories but also not shy away from the conversation and provide them with a safe space to talk openly about their worries. If you are struggling to know where to start, you may find the below suggestions helpful.

Try not to shy away from having a conversation. Children are constantly absorbing all that is going on and will have noticed the stark changes around them. They may have noticed others wearing face masks, the supermarket shelves becoming empty, and of course the huge changes to their everyday routines. Children are also incredibly sensitive to the emotions of others around them, most of whom are naturally likely to be feeling anxious themselves. All of this may lead to them becoming anxious, fearful and angry. Experiencing these big emotions may lead to changes in their behaviours, and so it is much better to have an honest conversation with them, helping them to understand what is happening around them and why. Remember children often look to adults for comfort in times of distress, a conversation can in part help provide that comfort.

Gauge the best time to have a conversation with your child. Picking the right time can make a huge difference to how the conversation is received. Whilst having a conversation with our children when they are feeling anxious can be useful for some, it is also important to remember that if they are struggling to manage their emotions they may not take the information in, in the right way, or maybe even at all. This could also be the case if a child is feeling overly tired, which as we can all relate to, sometimes makes it harder to manage our emotions. Using children's behaviour and emotions as a gauge can help us to identify the best time to talk. It is also worth giving ourselves time to manage our own anxieties ahead of the conversation, so that these are less likely to be unintentionally transferred to our children.

Let them take the lead. If we are feeling unsure as to how much our children already know, it may be helpful to start the conversation by asking them what they have heard about coronavirus, or what they think about the coronavirus. This may be useful in addressing any misconceptions they have picked up, and can also be helpful in giving us an idea as to what pitch we need to take. Whilst it is important to ensure we give age appropriate information, it may be the case that our children demonstrate either a higher or lower level of understanding than what we may have first anticipated. Having an idea of where our children's understanding is at can help us adapt our conversation appropriately. It is also important that we try to allow children to have the opportunity to ask questions too, and that we answer these as honestly as we can. If we don't know the answer to their question we can simply explain to them that we are not sure, but we will find out the answer for them.

Utilise resources. Many leading professionals are beginning to release stories appropriate for children. This may help give some structure to the conversation, and may also provide us with some reassurance that what we are telling them is appropriate.

- Children's guide to coronavirus. Children's commissioner. Downloadable at www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childrens-guide-to-coronavirus/
- EBook: Dave the Dog is worried about coronavirus. Molly Watts. Downloadable at <https://nursedottybooks.com/dave-the-dog-is-worried-about-coronavirus-2/>
- EBook: Hello! My name is coronavirus. Manuela Molina. Downloadable at www.mindheart.co/descargables
- EBook: Don't walk your cat and other advice for a worried kid. Kate McCulley & Jade Amalos. Downloadable at www.littlemummascreations.com.au

Provide reassurance. During times of uncertainty we can feel as though we are in danger, or that we aren't fully safe. We can help reassure our children by explaining the ways in which we are going to try and help keep them safe. For example by staying in the house, by maintaining a good distance between ourselves and other people outside of our home, by washing our hands regularly for 20 seconds, and by keeping our homes clean. This may lead to further questions such as why it is no longer safe to have contact with family members when we used to see them all the time. Again try to answer these questions as honestly as possible. It may also be useful to help our children to understand what they can do to help keep themselves safe too. For example by washing their hands, by trying not to touch their faces, or by not touching too many things when they go out. This may help them to feel as though they have some control over a situation they have found themselves in, that like many of us we didn't ask to be in.

Normalise their emotions. Occasionally children can experience emotions that are less familiar to them. This can sometimes be confusing for them, and they may feel as though they are unusual/naughty/bad for experiencing these emotions. It's really important that we normalise these emotions for our children, to help them understand that everyone feels these feelings, and it is perfectly ok. If we are able to name the emotion our child is experiencing and model how to manage this emotion in a positive way, they are more likely to develop a healthy understanding of their emotions and skills which help them to manage these. Children can often find it useful to verbalise their emotions, and physically write them down, so completing a little craft activity can help. For example if our children are feeling anxious, we may choose to create a worry monster with them out of an old box. Having decorated the box like a monster our children can then write down their worry for the monster to eat, and if they like the monster (us) may even choose to write back to reassure them.

Extra love and hugs may be needed. It is completely normal for our children to seek extra comfort and security whilst they are feeling anxious or scared. Some children may experience heightened separation anxiety and therefore feel the need to constantly make contact with us. This is perfectly normal and we can support our children by reassuring them that we are there for them, that we will try our best to keep them safe, and by giving them extra cuddles and attention. Whilst giving our children extra love and hugs can be wonderful, it is also perfectly normal for this to feel draining, especially if we are having a hard time managing our own anxieties around the situation. Self care is really important here to make sure we are in the best position to provide the love and care that our children need. Self care isn't selfish, we can't pour from an empty cup, and we certainly can't give our children extra love if we aren't giving it to ourselves. Try and schedule in some self care time each day. This may include going for a walk, having a bath, reading a book or completing other activities and hobbies that we find enjoyable.