

Talking to your Teenager about Coronavirus

These are unprecedented times and it can be hard as a parent or carer to know how to approach the subject with Secondary-age children. In this sheet there are tips for how you might go about it. This guidance sheet sits alongside three others in the series:

- managing your own anxiety as adults (or indeed young people)
- tips for (young) children on keeping calm and carrying on
- how to talk with your young child about the coronavirus epidemic

We will cover a little about how distressing events typically affect secondary-aged children, discussing typical developmental stages. We will explore the best ways to offer support to them and share ideas for developing their coping and resilience skills.

Starting points

- take steps to manage your own anxiety, making sure that you are not broadcasting it through your body posture, tone of voice, or lack of patience;
- be conscious of what your child will be hearing from radio, TV, phone conversations and other media, turning them off for part of the day;
- make yourself a positive role model for good communication, regular exercise, keeping busy, relaxing happily and remaining loving and caring.

Developmental stage – Adolescence

- At this stage, it is normal to develop distinct and different opinions from your parents.
- Their peers become extremely important to them (and will be greatly missed).
- They will be accessing information from far and wide via different media – sometimes at an ease and flexibility of access which parents cannot hope to aspire to.
- They may be able to see the bigger picture and the long-term impacts of the pandemic.
- They will certainly understand the risks and worry about this, especially with family and friends.
- They may be developing philosophical views on why things are so.
- They might be willing to take unnecessary risks and feel thwarted when they cannot.
- They are probably feeling confused and anxious (or demotivated) about changes in their education.

Ways to support

- Be clear about the facts, and honest about what you don't know as well as what you know.
- Look up information together on recognised websites (e.g. WHO).
- Let them take some control ("I wonder what we can do to help...").
- Encourage deeper questions and discussion and give time and value to these discussions. Encourage reflection but avoid seeming judgemental.
- Help them find ways to stay in touch with their friends.
- Give a strong message that "It will pass - we will get through this together".
- Don't expect too much from them at this time – adjust your expectations and allow them 'space'.
- If schoolwork is a battle ground, then your first priority at this stage is everyone's mental health – a short time away from education will not damage things in the long-term. Tell your school – they will understand.
- Encourage some relaxation and pampering during the day – an occasional duvet day might not go amiss.
- Aim for a later start than usual for schoolwork, in order to fit in with the adolescent body clock!
- Challenge fake news and challenge any catastrophising (e.g. "We're all going to die...")
- Avoid (though discussion and evidence) conspiracy theorising and blame culture – it is really not helpful at this time.
- Help them see opportunities in the current lock-down - new skills to be learned, new virtual contacts made, new voluntary help (e.g. teaching a younger sibling, teaching parents a computer game, redecorating a bedroom, doing extra jobs for money or treats, game or film nights with friends online, making videos, reading, daily exercise routine...)
- Whenever you can, *ask* them what they are going to do and what help they need rather than *tell* them what they should be doing (e.g. "How are you going to use this time? What help do you need from me?").
- Recognise and acknowledge feelings rather than just seeing challenging behaviours ("I can see you're upset. I wonder if you are worried about... but I still need you to...").
- Try to remain patient and a good listener' – and, above all, try to keep the communication between you open and ongoing.

Being a good listener

- If you are working at the time, give value to your child's questions and set a time to talk about them more fully ("I'm glad you asked that – it's an important question. Let's set some time together this afternoon and have a really good talk about it")
- Be wary of not trying to close the conversation by saying that everything is fine and the child shouldn't worry – this is tricky because it is our natural inclination to 'rescue' our children and keep them from feeling bad.

- Instead, ask open questions (“How are you feeling today?” rather than yes/no questions such as “Are you sad?”) and show by your posture and patience that you are interested and want to hear and to understand what they are saying to you.
- Try to ‘hear’ the feelings behind their words or to ‘read’ the feelings behind any changes in behaviour.
- Reflect back what you think they are saying to you and how you believe they are feeling by offering a summary (“So it sounds as though you’re feeling anxious because ...” and “lots of your friends will be feeling like that; let’s think together about what might help”).
- Try to end up with something the child can actually do to help themselves – this makes the child part of the solution and have some ‘agency’ in coping.

Signs your child might not be coping well

There are certain signs to look out for, which should alert you to stepping up your support for them at this time.

- regression to more childlike behaviours and emotions;
- problems with sleep such as sleeplessness and nightmares;
- tearfulness or irritability;
- tummy aches or lack of appetite;
- uncharacteristically challenging behaviour.

Stick to your routines but also acknowledge how the child might be feeling and deal with things calmly and patiently. Make sure you have a ‘special time’ every day when you talk together peacefully one-to-one. You can also teach ways for your child to manage anxiety:

- have regular mealtimes together (without screentime);
- help the child care for another (the responsibility of keeping in touch with Granny, etc.);
- make the bedtime routine and the room itself sleep-focused with no screens for an hour beforehand;
- use appropriate stories, films, art, creativity as tools for escapism;
- develop mindfulness techniques (there are various Apps for developing the techniques and people have found ‘Calm’ and ‘Headspace’ helpful; the key is to steady your breathing, slow everything down and ‘be in the moment’).
- try some of the ideas in another sheet in this series - tips for adults (and indeed young people) on keeping calm and carrying on.