

## **Talking to your young child about Coronavirus**

These are unprecedented times and it can be hard as a parent or carer to know how to approach the subject with young 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 older children and adolescents about the coronavirus

We will cover a little about how distressing events typically affect early years and primary-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 young child might be over-hearing from radio, TV, your phone conversations and other media, turning them off for much of the day;
- avoid black humour in the vicinity of young children – they can take things very literally;
- make yourself a positive role model for good communication, regular exercise, keeping busy, relaxing happily and remaining loving and caring;
- focus on what remains the same as before, sticking to familiar routines and family rituals wherever you can.

### **Developmental stages**

#### **Children under 7**

- Children this young will not be able to grasp what is happening in the world.
- They tend to live in their own worlds, interested in the here and now and matters of personal interest or need.
- They have no real sense of time or distance so you need to focus on what is going to happen next or that day.
- They are capable of 'magical thinking' (e.g. a cuddly who can magic away your tears).
- They pick up easily on underlying anxieties and emotions in others, without understanding what the anxiety is about.
- They struggle with changes to their routines and do best when you stick to the same routines and boundaries.
- Above all, they need your physical comfort at this stage.
- Teach them everyday practicalities (handwashing songs etc.).

- Encourage them to play. Do not be surprised if they express strong feelings during their play – this is all part of their processing what is going on.
- However, do intercede to encourage positive helpers in their small role play (hospital workers, helpful heroes, etc.).
- Focus on what is happening now and what will happen next.

### **Primary school children**

- They are beginning to have a knowledge of mortality (e.g. that pets and people sometimes die) and are capable of worrying about family and friends.
- They usually have alternative ways of hearing information over and above what you tell them (through media and friends).
- They often have mixed emotions e.g. being anxious yet excited at the same time. This is normal.
- They find changes challenging so make the most of your new routine, with a picture timetable if it helps.
- They want to have some agency in things – in other words, a ‘job to do’. So let them come up with ways to help themselves pass the time or keep life at home happy and busy.
- Above all, keep communication with them open.

### **Begin an ongoing conversation**

- You can’t avoid the subject altogether – pretending that nothing is amiss will not help you engender trust and coping skills in your child.
- Your task is to find the right balance between providing the information they ask for, in a way they can process, and not adding to their worries.
- Be honest (especially about what people don’t know yet) though also be brief.
- Acknowledge their feelings and normalise these for the child (“I know this can feel scary – a lot of people feel like that”).
- Be willing to answer questions – in fact tell your child that it’s OK to ask you questions. You might not know the answers – there might not *be* answers - but you can try to find out what you’d like to know together.

### **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 sad because ....” and “lots of children 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.

### **Difficult Questions**

These will take your full creativity and sense of balance – aim for honesty, keep them brief and provide answers at a level your child can understand and process. For example:

Q What is Coronavirus?

A That’s a big word for a new type of flu.

Q Why can’t I go out?

A We are all part of a community and trying to protect others from catching the illness. Most people are feeling sad about this but we think it’s the best way to stay safe.

Q Will we die?

A It does not mean that everyone is going to die. Most people will be OK.

Q Will granddad die?

A Grandad is looking after himself and we’re all working hard to protect older people by staying at home.

Q When will it end?

A I’m not sure, but a lot of people are working hard to find a cure.

### **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 play and talk together peacefully one-to-one, such as before bedtime. You can also teach ways for your child to manage anxiety:

- have regular mealtimes together (without screentime);
- ensure plenty of play (this is therapeutic as well as educational);
- help the child care for another (pet or pictures for Granny, etc.);
- make the bedtime routine and the room itself sleep-focused;
- use appropriate stories, films, art, creativity as tools for escapism;
- try some of the ideas in another sheet in this series - tips for (young) children on keeping calm and carrying on.