

Talking with Children about COVID19

Parent Tip Sheet

There is a common misconception that talking with children and young people about a topic such as COVID-19 may increase anxiety. However, research suggests it may have the opposite effect. For children not having information is scary and many children will fill in the blanks with their own imagination-often imagining something far worse than the truth. Older children may take to the internet and social media for their answers, which can sometimes become overwhelming or misleading.

Remain calm and reassuring

Children will react to both what you say and how you say it. They will pick up cues from conversations you have with them and with others in front of them. Your words and your body language when you discuss COVID-19, current prevention efforts and related events can either decrease or increase your child's anxiety. If you are visibly upset or react in a way that suggests you are fearful, children will take their cues from you. Remain calm in your conversations and reassure them that the health authorities are providing guidelines and advice on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and that we are lucky to live in a country where we can access immediate and high-quality medical attention.

Explain the efforts that are being made to contain the virus

Travel in and out of affected areas is being restricted and scientists are working to develop a vaccine. In Australia government authorities are carefully monitoring and actively managing the situation and the risk to the public remains low. Children should be confident any confirmed cases will be quickly treated in our world-class hospitals.

Make Time to Listen and Talk

Be patient: children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do daily chores. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

When sharing information, it is important to make sure to provide the facts without promoting a high level of stress. Remind children that adults are working to address this concern and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

For early primary school aged children, provide brief simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their school and home is safe and that adults are there to keep them healthy and take care of them if they get sick. If it turns out that there are cases of infection

at school, actions will be taken to ensure that the school population will be kept safe and this may mean students will be advised to stay home until these actions can be carried out. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy such as washing hands, keeping social distance and sneezing or coughing into a tissue and then discarding it into the bin, or into the crook of their elbow. Use language such as, “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”

Middle primary to early secondary school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether or not they are truly safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumour or fantasy. Discuss efforts school and community leaders are making to prevent germs from spreading.

Upper middle and high school students will be more able to discuss the issue in a more adult like fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts found on health authority websites. Keep yourself up to date with the latest advice and provide honest, accurate and factual information about the current status of COVID-19.

Avoid blaming or stereotyping that may lead to stigma and discrimination

It is important to avoid stereotyping one group of people as responsible for the spread of the virus. Bullying or negative comments made toward others should be called out and reported to the school. Be aware of any comments that other adults are having around your family. You may need to explain what comments mean if they are different to the values you have at home.

Monitor television viewing and social media

Limit television viewing or access to information on the internet or social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that may be upsetting when your children are present. Speak to your children about how many stories on the internet may be based on rumours or inaccurate information. Constantly watching updates on COVID-19 can increase anxiety-avoid this. Engage your children in games or other interesting activities instead.

Maintain normal routines to the extent possible

Keep a regular schedule, this can be reassuring. Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Be honest and accurate

In the absence of factual information, children often imagine far worse than reality. Children can be told this disease is thought to be spread between people who are in close physical contact with one another, when a person coughs or sneezes. Explain that keeping 1-2 metres distance is thought to be a safe distance. It is also thought to be spread when you touch an infected

surface or object, which is why it is so important to protect yourself by washing your hands for 2 minutes often during the day if, for example after you hold on to and escalator handrail.

Know the symptoms of COVID-19

Fever, cough or shortness of breath are symptoms that appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the disease or as long as 14 days after exposure. For some people, the symptoms are like having a cold. For others they are quite severe or even life threatening. In either case, it is important to check with a health care professional and follow instructions about staying home or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection

Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds). Practise giving elbow bumps instead of handshakes, or hugging. Providing children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection, gives them a greater sense of control over the disease spread and will help reduce anxiety.

Suggested Points to Emphasise When Talking to Children

- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult.
- Not everyone will get COVID-19 disease. The authorities are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- It is important that all people treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue and then throw the tissue into the bin.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds)
- If you don't have soap and water, use hand sanitiser (60-95% alcohol based)
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Available Supports

Contact Lifeline Australia's telephone counselling service on 13 11 14 for information, referral and advice.

Obtain help from the Local General Practitioner or community Health Centre.

Contact www.health.sa.gov.au

Contact Human Psychology on 1300277924 for more information about the Medicare tele-health service for COVID-19 or go to our website - www.humanpsychology.com.au

Emergency support

If you or someone in your workplace is in crisis and you think immediate action is needed, call emergency services (triple zero - 000), contact your doctor or local mental health crisis service, or go to your local hospital emergency department.

Emergency contact information - 24 hours

If you or someone you know needs help, call:

- Emergency on 000 (or 112 from a mobile phone)
- Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800
- MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978
- Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

