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Talking to your children about the coronavirus pandemic



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The Mental Health Foundation is part of the national mental health response during the coronavirus outbreak. Government advice designed to keep us safe is under constant review and will be different depending on where you live: [more details and up to date information here](#).

News about the coronavirus pandemic is everywhere. With schools closing and many people constantly exposed to digital media, it is no longer possible to control the news that we consume, or to shield children from upsetting information.

What you can do is to help minimise the negative impact it has on your children. You can do this through open and honest conversations at home. Here are some top tips:

1. Start by acknowledging that it is OK to be concerned

This will be an unprecedented time for many of us. Children are very likely to understand the uncertainty that you as parent are exposed to, or to hear stories that are not expressed in an age-appropriate way.

Go through all their concerns and questions with them, rather than well-meaningly dismissing their feelings by telling them everything is fine. Try sharing with them that you also find events like this worrying. Let them know that you can balance up these worries with the knowledge that they will likely not come true.

You would want them to leave the conversation realising that, although bad things can happen, many people including world-leading experts are working very hard to reduce the impact of the pandemic, so they do not need to be scared all the time.

Try to be careful not to have conversations about your fears – particularly relating to deaths, serious illness and worry for friends or family within earshot. Children pick up more than we realise, and they may misinterpret or keep their feelings hidden from you.

2. Find the balance in consuming news

Small doses of real-life news from trustworthy sources are really helpful. Lots of exposure can do harm, because children can become fixated on a news story and repeatedly look at news coverage relating to it.

The important thing here is balance. Force-feeding news to children or going to great lengths to shield them from it, can be unhelpful.

Avoid turning the television off or closing web pages when they come in to the room. This can spark their interest in knowing what's really going on – and that is when their imagination can take over.

3. Let them know the facts and offer safety

If children have access to clear and honest explanations of what is happening, and they know it's okay to talk about the pandemic, no matter how scary, then it can give them the confidence to reach out to you. All children, even teenagers, want to know that their parents can keep them safe.

The best way to communicate safety is by talking about worrying news with open, confident, clear and truthful facts. Talk to them about what they can do to look after themselves and others, explaining the importance of hand washing, for example. It's also a good opportunity to talk about [the benefits of kindness](#).

To avoid overexposure, encourage them to discuss the news with you once they have read about it. This provides a safe space for all their questions. If you don't have the answers, be honest and try reading or watching reputable news sources together, that you have already previewed, or share news in the moment by explaining what is happening verbally in an unbiased way.

Check in with them regularly to ask if they are discussing the pandemic with friends – especially if they have access to messenger apps to stay in touch with school friends. Reassure them that they can ask you questions.

4. Talk about vulnerability and responsibility

Explain to your children what it means to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is not weakness; it is a natural response to experiencing uncertainty and risk and being emotionally exposed.

You may be feeling vulnerable as a parent in having this conversation with your child. Try to acknowledge this and offer them a lot of time for discussion and support from you.

Talk to your children about what it means to be vulnerable (i.e. [belonging to a high risk group](#) as defined by the NHS) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and explain how many of the responses to it have been put in place to help protect those who are vulnerable.

You can use this as an opportunity for teaching children to grow into responsible citizens. Abiding by the measures – such as not going out and gathering with other people – means understanding that there is something bigger than individuals, and that we should protect each other.

Remind them that bullying is always wrong, and that we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.

There are good resources available to help you, including the Children's Commissioner's Children's Guide to Coronavirus [here](#), or the Inter-Agency Standing Committee have produced a storybook developed by and for children around the world affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) [here](#).

More useful resources:

- [More coronavirus tips and advice](#)

The Mental Health Foundation is committed to bringing readers reliable and relevant information. All of our pages are written and regularly reviewed by our mental health experts, in line with official advice on the coronavirus outbreak.

We need your support to keep providing vital information during this time.

Please consider making a donation today

Public Health England have developed explicit guidance on mental health in the crisis. If you want to develop a personalised plan for supporting your mental health you can also visit the PHE [Every Mind Matters site](#), developed in collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation.

If you need to talk confidentially you can call Samaritans on 116 123 at any time. We also have a resource on [how to get help for your mental health](#).

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Do you need urgent help?

If your mental or emotional state quickly gets worse, or you're worried about someone you know - **help is available.**

You're not alone; talk to someone you trust. Sharing a problem is often the first step to recovery.

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