

Communicating with your children about COVID-19

Many parents and carers may be wondering how to talk with their child or children about COVID-19 and what information to share. This resource is designed to help you to prepare for these conversations.

Talking with children about COVID-19 will help you and your children come together to make sense of how the virus is impacting on your family.

Talking can:

1. Help children make sense of what they have been seeing, hearing and feeling.
2. Promote hope by sharing information about the actions being taken in the community and at home to respond to COVID-19 and its implications.



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Why is talking about it important?

Conversations with your child about challenging circumstances are important. These conversations can help your child to cope, be prepared, and make sense of what they are seeing, hearing and feeling. When your child does not understand the situation, they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand what is going on.

1. Helping children make sense of what they have been seeing, hearing and experiencing

Babies, toddlers and young children

Babies and toddlers aren't likely to understand what is happening in the community, but they will notice changes in you and those closest to them. Changes that they are likely to notice include:

- changes in how you are feeling
- how distracted you are, particularly your use of phones or other devices
- how you are responding to them.

To reassure and support babies and toddlers through these changes:

- Try to maintain important daily routines so that you can spend regular time together (e.g. playing, stories, mealtimes).
- Limit having the television on while children are playing or in the room.
- Set up some of your own rituals to avoid being distracted by your phone or other devices when you are playing or spending time with your children.
- Find ways to keep children connected with friends and loved ones that they might be separated from such as video calling, sending photos by phone or creating artwork for them.

Talking tip

Set up some of your own rituals to avoid being distracted by your phone or other devices when you are playing or spending time with your children. Some parents find turning their devices on silent or off and putting them in another room helps to reduce the temptation to keep checking or respond to notifications.

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Older children

Children, just like adults, are often exposed to so much information that it can be difficult to sort through what is fact, fiction and what is unknown. It is likely that many children are confused by the volume of information that is circulating at the moment, or worried about what they have heard. Talking with your children can help you understand what they are worried about and respond with accurate information or help them to find it.

Finding reliable sources of information to help you respond

Select two to three trusted and reliable sources and familiarise yourself with information that can give you the up-to-date facts. Sticking to these sources means you don't have to curate the misinformation, myths and rumours that are widespread and can cause you and your children additional worry.

Reliable information sources to consider include:

Department of Health: www.health.gov.au

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus

UNICEF: www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19

Try to limit you and your family's exposure to media and news about COVID-19, as it can quickly become overwhelming. Reduce video news – both on TV and in your newsfeed – and when you do check-in be sure to select reliable sources and be consistent in using these. There are many rumours and sources of inaccurate information that can contribute to your own and your family's worry.

Check in with yourself

Before you start a conversation with your child, check in with yourself. Are you ready to talk about this? Are you prepared for questions that might come? Do you have enough accurate information? And importantly, do you have worries, concerns or anxiety about these events?

If you feel you cannot answer these questions it might not be the best time to talk. Tell your child you will do some homework first and then make time to sit down with them. In the meantime, find something you can do together so that they do not feel left to their own worries.

Starting the conversation

When you feel the time is right to talk with your child, open the conversation gently. As much as possible, give space for your child to talk, and to lead the conversation. Be sure to listen to what they say. This is their opportunity to ask questions, and to make sense of what is happening.

Try hard not to jump into the conversation but to leave time for your child to think, talk and to pause as they may have more to say and might just be looking for the words to help them express their feelings. Sit with them for short pauses to make sure they have now finished with that thought.

You might like to help start the conversation by focussing on what your child has experienced at home, at school or in the community. Some examples include:

You have probably been hearing lots of things about (e.g. a virus, COVID-19, people getting sick etc), did you have any questions about it?

You might have noticed I have been a bit distracted looking at my phone and the news a lot lately, that's because I have been worried about (e.g. coronavirus, COVID-19). Has anything been worrying you too?

The supermarket was really busy today and lots of the shelves were empty, do you know why?

I have started doing my work from home, do you know why?

Try to answer any questions as honestly and as simply as you can, in an age appropriate way.

Stick to the facts but remember that you don't have to talk about the graphic details.

Correct any misconceptions, but don't deny the seriousness of what is happening, or what they are concerned about. If you aren't sure, be confident in saying you don't know but that you will try to find out.

How you feel matters too!

Most of us are worrying about what is happening – and that is okay. Give yourself permission and time to think about what is worrying you. In the short term, worry can be useful as it can help us focus our thinking on the challenges we are facing and plan how to respond.

It can be helpful to write down your worries and then think about the things you feel you can deal with now and the things you might need more information or support with.

It is also important to find ways to give yourself a break from worry and from thinking about what is happening.

Your usual ways of relaxing are important for your wellbeing.

If you are struggling to relax, now might be the time to try out some new strategies such as getting outside, practising mindfulness or listening to music.

Free apps like the Smiling Mind (www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app) are a great way to access short guided meditations and mindfulness techniques.

If your child is also worried you might like share what you find helpful.

Some common concerns and questions

Some common concerns and questions from children are included below, along with example responses for you to consider.

- **What will happen if I get it?**

You sound very worried about this, what have you heard?

Allow your child to fully answer so you can hear what their worries are.

If you get sick, we will do all the things we normally do when you're not well. We will contact the doctor and they might want to test whether you have the virus. If they do, we may have to wait a day or so to find out if it is the virus or a cold or flu.

In the meantime, we will self-isolate as a family. This means we'll be staying at home and not having contact with anyone else, except for Facetime or WhatsApp.

If the test comes back positive, and you're well enough to be at home, we will keep on self-isolating for at least 14 days or until you're not able to pass the virus on to anyone. By doing this we're helping to stop the bug from spreading to other people.

I know this might be a bit boring and hard but we'll make the most of it with movies, stories and lots of chill out time together.

- **What will happen to Nana and Pa?**

Be honest with your answers especially if grandparents are in high risk groups, and do not make promises that they will not get sick.

Are you worried that Nana and Pa might get sick?

Allow your child to fully answer so you can hear what their worries are.

If grandparents have good health:

Nana and Pa are in the older age group and that does place them at a greater risk, but they are healthy and active and have been putting things in place to help keep themselves safe and well.

More generally:

I know you may have heard a lot about older people being more at risk, and yes this is true, but as a country we are trying very hard to protect our older people. You may have heard things about special shopping times and about making sure hospitals have enough doctors and nurses. If Nana and Pa do get sick they might stay at home or could go to hospital. We won't be able to visit, but we will be able to keep in touch by phone or Messenger.

- **How long will it last?**

Clarify what your child means with a question like this, for example are they asking how long someone will be sick or how long all the changes will be in place?

How long the virus will be around is unknown so be clear not to say things that are incorrect or to make promises that it will all be over soon.

The illness can last just a few days in some people, but other people may be sick for longer.

It's difficult to say how long the changes will be around. What we do know is that scientists and doctors are working around the clock to learn as much as they can about COVID-19 and come up with the best ways to treat it.

In the meantime, we can do our bit by hanging out at home and catching up with friends on WhatsApp instead of heading to (netball, footy, dancing etc.).

- **Why can't we go to sport/events/church etc?**

One of the things that we know about COVID-19 is that it can be transmitted from person to person by droplets from coughing and sneezing.

So, to help keep people well the government has put in place rules to try and stop the virus spreading and that means reducing gatherings where lots of people are together in one place.

This is pretty tough because we all enjoy going to (footy, dancing, church etc.) but for now it's really important for us to do our bit to help.

What sorts of things do you think we can do as a family to stay well but keep connected with our friends and community, even if we can't be all together in the same place?

Take time to really listen

Before you answer your child's questions, it is important to remember to allow them to talk.

For example, if your child is scared of catching COVID-19, it may be easy to assume they are scared of becoming very sick. However, they might be more worried about not seeing friends or putting a burden on you to care for them when they know there is so much else happening.

Take time to really listen so that you are best able to address their worries or concerns.

Keep the discussion open

Let your child know that it is okay to ask questions now, or later, and be prepared to answer questions further down the track.

Resources to help you answer questions

- *Coronavirus (COVID-19) and children in Australia* Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia
- *Coronavirus (COVID-19) – frequently asked questions.* Department of Health: www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-frequently-asked-questions
- *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): What parents should know* UNICEF: www.unicef.org/stories/novel-coronavirus-outbreak-what-parents-should-know
- *Q&A on coronaviruses (COVID-19)* World Health Organisation: www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses



2. Promote hope by sharing information about the actions being taken in the community and at home

The best way to communicate hope is to talk about the actions that are being taken to prepare, to stay safe and to recover. Talk to children about:

- What is happening in the community

Lots of people are working really hard to keep everyone safe, for example, doctors and nurses are getting ready to look after people if they get sick.

- What you are doing at home

We have some extra food and supplies just in case we need to stay home to help stop the spread of the virus and we are making an extra effort to wash our hands and clean the bench.

- What they can do

Children often want to help. You can share some of the helpful things that they can do such as washing hands and covering their mouth and nose when they cough.

One of the most important things you can do is to help stop the virus from spreading. This means washing your hands more regularly and for longer – let's try singing 'Happy Birthday' all the way through while we wash. You can also cover your mouth with your elbow whenever you cough or sneeze.

How are your children coping?

Your children might not be worried about what is happening – and that is okay. It is also natural for children to feel worried about what is happening around them or what could happen.

If you are concerned about how your children are coping and what you can do, you might like to use the free Child360 app to help you do a quick check in, available from the [App Store](#) and [Google Play](#).

For further information go to www.emergingminds.com.au

For further support

It's natural to feel worried about COVID-19, if you or anyone in your family would like more support you can contact:

Beyond Blue: www.beyondblue.org.au / 1300 22 4636
Lifeline: www.lifeline.org.au / 13 11 14
Kids Helpline: www.kidshelpline.com.au / 1800 55 1800

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