

Coping with anxiety during unsettling times: *Advice from a Clinical Psychologist*



Advice from Dr Helen Care



Talking to children about Coronavirus



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We chatted with clinical psychologist Dr Helen Care and she shares some advice for parents on talking to children about the COVID-19 pandemic

All of us, parents, teachers, carers and professionals, are working out how to think about and cope with the current situation. Working out how to explain it and talk about it to our children is always more difficult when our own emotions are involved too.

Like all difficult things, there is no single right way to do this. This is a new situation for all of us, no-one has been through this scale of pandemic in our lifetime. However, there are some strategies we can learn from talking to children about other difficult situations to make talking to them about COVID-19 easier. Although the situation is different, the general principles are the same.


Firstly, manage your own emotions. This has also been advised by The British Psychological Society ([BPS- Talking to children about Coronavirus](#)). If you are feeling overwhelmed by the situation or how you feel about it, then you may not feel able to be as helpful to your child as you want to be. Try to get your own support and give yourself permission and time to feel whatever you are feeling and deal with it the best you can. It is OK to get someone else to talk to your children if you don't feel able to. Is there another parent, grandparent, professional or family friend who might be able to help?

Remember, you don't have to know all the answers and you don't have to be perfect.



If you feel that you or someone you know (be they a parent, child, teacher or young person) are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek immediate professional help.

Seek an emergency GP appointment or call 999 if you or someone you know is at immediate risk.



Some other great sources of information and guidance on **worry, anxiety** and **youth mental health** are:

- [British Psychological Society](#)
- [NSPCC](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre](#)



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Strategies and tips that might help:

Acknowledge emotions

It is fine for your child to know you are worried or upset but try to find ways to help them see that emotion as contained rather than totally overwhelming.

For example:

“I am feeling really sad about not being able to go out and see my friends.”

I am going to talk to them on the phone and look forward to when I can see them again.”



You can label, or guess at their emotions too.

For example:

“I wonder if you are feeling sad about not seeing your friends?”

“I think you are feeling angry that you can't go to the swimming pool today.”

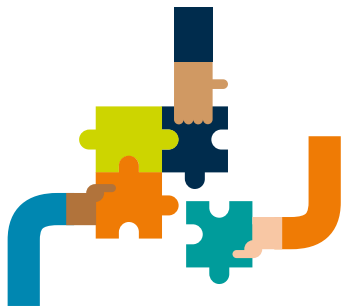


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If a child is asking a question, they need an answer

As adults, we often think children are vulnerable and will be too upset or won't be able to cope, so we try not to tell them things. We might think we are protecting them, but children will have noticed the changes going on around them and so it is important that they feel comfortable enough to ask questions that come naturally, even if you feel you do not have the answers. The British Psychological Society also emphasises the importance of allowing children to ask questions ([BPS- Talking to children about Coronavirus](#)). Not speaking to your children about the matter can make it worse. If they are old enough to ask, they are old enough to need an answer (but that doesn't mean you have to tell them everything).



Be led by your child

As a rule, try to let your child lead the conversation and go where they need to. If they bring it up first, start with a relatively simple statement and ask if they need more information.

For example, if a child asks:

“Why can't I go to school?”

“School is closed so that all the children don't spread germs to each other. Germs can be spread on our hands or in our breath. If we stay away from school, we can't breathe on each other or spread germs on our hands. Is there anything else you want to know about that?”

“Why can't I go to Granny's house?”

“The Coronavirus can be very dangerous for some older people like Granny. If we stay away, we are helping her stay healthy. Does that make sense?”

Some children may not need or want any more information. If they do, then try your best to answer them. If you don't know the answer, it is OK to look it up, or ask someone who might.



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Open conversations, but don't force them

Children may not be ready to talk about it or may not need to. They don't have to be worried about it just because we are. If they haven't asked, try opening the conversation at a time when you are all relaxed and you will feel able to answer questions if they arise. Provide a very small amount of information and ask an open question. If they don't ask more, don't force it. If they know it is a conversation they are allowed to have, they will come back to it when they are ready.

“Have you talked about coronavirus at school? Is there anything you are worried about?”

‘Do you understand why you can't go to school? Is it OK?’

Both [NSCPCC](#) and [Young Minds charity](#) suggest that play or positive activities such as reading, cooking or painting can be a good way to get children talking about their feelings, worries, or open up about any questions they may have. This can also be a good distraction to help reduce any anxieties.

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More useful tips from the charities can be found here:

- [NSPCC](#)
- [YoungMinds - Talking to your child about coronavirus](#)





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Be prepared for some odd questions

Children can process information in a different way from adults. They can ask things that may seem strange to us. They may focus in on a detail that doesn't seem important or miss out on the things that seem most significant to us. This just reflects the different stage they are at or their differing level of understanding. Don't worry, and don't feel like you have to make them 'get it'. Let them get there in their own time.

It is also worth bearing in mind that there is a certain age and stage for children when they can often become very interested in the technical, sometimes quite gruesome, 'facts' of a situation. This is often not them trying to be horrible or annoying, they are just trying to make sense of a weird world! You do not have to know the answers to their more gruesome questions, but don't be worried or disgusted by them asking!

Don't be afraid to talk about it again

Children will often need to come back to things more than once. Quite often they may say nothing about it for days or even weeks, and then suddenly another question will pop out. It isn't because they have been worrying about it the whole time necessarily, that's just how they process things. Life goes on in between for them in a much more 'normal' way and their thoughts are often more distracted by other things. Again, it isn't that they don't care if they don't mention it for a fortnight, it is just that they are making sense of it in their own way. Keep conversations open and children will find their own ways to make it make sense to them. You may find they keep coming back to the same questions over and over again, as they understand more or try to make sense of what is happening. Be patient. They usually aren't trying to be annoying; they may just need to hear things more than once to understand.



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Manage what your child is overhearing

Whilst it is important to talk to children, it is also important sometimes to not talk to them. Or rather, to not force them to keep hearing talk of the same thing. It is also important to be aware that even if children don't look like they are listening, or we think they aren't old enough to 'take it in', they may well be hearing more than we think. If they didn't ask the question and aren't ready for the answer, when they hear us talking about it, they may struggle to fully process what is being said and can make $2 + 2 = 19$ before we realise it. It is also important not to overload them with 'adult' worries and responsibilities if they aren't ready for them. Just remember, we all need a break from the worries of the world sometimes, our children more than anyone.



Know when to stop talking about it

The most important thing we can give our children is our attention. It is how they know we care about them. It is how they work out which behaviours are important to us and what makes us happy. Children crave our attention and our affection. If they are feeling confused, worried, overwhelmed or angry, they will be demanding more of our attention, not less. When we talk about a behaviour as 'attention seeking' as if that is a bad thing, we are ignoring the fact that our attention is the only thing children really care about. If we ignore them, they can't thrive.

Right now, there are a lot of calls on our attention. We are all distracted by the news, worried about loved ones, jobs, finances and so on. Many of us are trying to hold down jobs and work around children. This is a huge challenge for all of us, but especially so for our children. When it comes to talking about Coronavirus and the current situation, it is also vital that we stop talking about it sometimes. We need to do our best to switch off and give our children our full attention. Turn off the mobile, the news, and the work email for at least some dedicated time and talk about something else.



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Your children's reactions will differ depending on the developmental key stage they may be going through.

Dr Helen Care, [NSPCC](#), [The British Psychological Society](#) and [Young Minds](#) emphasise that it is important to recognise your child's developmental ability and understanding of the situation so that you can respond in a way you feel is appropriate for them. There are no hard and fast rules to this, and different children will be at different stages at different times, just like they all learn to walk and ride bikes at different ages.

This is a rough guide that might help you think about where your child is at and what kind of worries they may have.

Toddlers (0-2 years)

Worries are immediate, concrete, and non-verbal.

For example:

“Where is Granny?”

“Can I have this biscuit?”

“Does Dad seem upset?”

They can't put their feelings into words, but they can respond to tension and worry in other people, especially those they love. They don't need any verbal explanation about the 'whys' of what is happening, they just need simple practical information, reassurance and lots of positive attention and affection.

“Granny can't come today.

We are going to make a card to send her.”

“Daddy is fine. Let's have a cuddle.”



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Early Years Foundation Stage (3-5years)

Worries are concrete, based in the here and now, and may be verbalised.

For example:

“Why is Mummy working upstairs?”

“Daddy, are you upset?”

“I miss my teacher.”

Children at this age can sometimes tell you what they are feeling but may not do so accurately. They might tell you one thing, ***“I hate this breakfast!”***, but their feelings are actually caused by something else, like their routine being disturbed. They will rarely be thinking about future time (not even as far as tomorrow or next week).

Their worries will usually be immediate and may seem very self-centred. This is not because they are selfish, but because they haven't yet developed the brain capacity to think about other people outside of themselves.

For example:

“But I want to see Granny. I don't care if she gets ill.”

They need explanations that are simple, clear and about them, and that have a suggested solution to help.

“We can't see Granny, but we can make her a card.”

“I know you are feeling cross that Mummy is working upstairs. She has to work now, or her boss will miss her. You can see her at teatime.”



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Key Stage 1 (5–7 years)

Worries are still concrete, but the child may be beginning to notice cause and effect and worry about threats to themselves.

For example:

“Can I get coronavirus?”

“Why can’t I see my friends tomorrow?”

“Do I still have to do my maths homework?”

At this age, children may need more information to feel reassured. They need simple, clear explanations. Try finding information from multiple sources and talk about how their feelings feel in their body. Label emotions.

For example:

“I can see you are worried about coronavirus. Sometimes when we are worried it can make our muscles and our throats feel tense. Coronavirus doesn’t feel like that. It is like flu and you would have a nasty cough, which you don’t have.”

It is important, particularly for children under seven, that we are very clear that things are not their fault. Children under seven are often described as having ‘magical thinking’ which means that they might not fully understand how things work and tend to attribute bad and good things that happen to themselves. It is important that we are very clear that they are not off school because they did anything wrong or were naughty. We must reassure them that it is not their fault if anyone gets ill.



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Key Stage 2 (7-11years)

Your child is developing a sense of cause and effect, greater awareness of others, and the possibility of worrying about longer term issues.

For example:

“What if school never reopens?”

“Could my mum get ill or die?”

“What will happen on my birthday next month?”

This can be one of the more challenging ages to talk to because children at this age are often old enough to worry quite a lot, but not necessarily old enough to understand all the information they are presented with. They may well not believe everything you tell them. Try helping them find some answers for themselves by looking things up from 'safe' sources of information, asking other adults they might trust, or watching age appropriate TV or documentaries. Be patient and try to answer what they need to hear.



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Key Stage 3 (11–14 years)

Worries can be longer term, more 'existential' and the child may be beginning to consider implications beyond themselves but are likely to be relatively focused on their immediate experience (their own grandparents, their own friendships...etc.).

For example:

“If it is old people that are affected, are my grandparents going to survive?”

“What will it be like when I go back to school? Will people forget me?”

Children in this age group have often developed quite a good 'intellectual' understanding and might even know more facts about Coronavirus than you. However, they often lag behind in terms of their emotional understanding. They may not know this

themselves and might end up seeking out more information than they can actually process or handle. Talk to them about what they know, where they found it out and how accurate it is. Steer them towards reliable sources of information if they need it, like [Newsround](#) or newspapers aimed at young people like [The Week – Junior](#) or [First News](#).

Encourage them to take breaks from looking at information and remind them to focus on fun. Give them very practical coping strategies like breathing techniques, mindfulness apps and spending time on other things. This age group may need more time than others to let you know what they are worried about. Try broaching the subject when they are relaxed and doing something else, for example, while out for a walk with you. Take their worries seriously and try not to dismiss them, even if they seem trivial to you.



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Key Stage 4 (14–16 years)

Depending on your child's emotional maturity in other ways, young people from this age onwards may have quite a sophisticated set of worries, not dissimilar to our own. They may be considering much wider implications for others and society.

For example:

“What happens if the health service can't cope?”

“Will cinemas ever be able to open again?”

“How will people in more deprived countries cope?”

“What will happen if none of us sit exams?”

With this age group, the rule is generally to listen. You should try to be available whenever you're allowed to be, and to provide as many opportunities as possible. It may help to acknowledge your own feelings and model talking about them in small, contained ways.

For instance:

“I am worried about getting the shopping delivered. I wonder what we can do about it?”

It is important to make it clear that it is OK to feel all sorts of different things right now. Bear in mind that young people in this age group are beginning to question your authority as parents and often rely heavily on friends. Be open about sources of information, ask open questions about what they know or what they have heard.

Most of all, be patient! They may not want to talk to you all the time, but they still need you and if you can show them you are willing to talk, they will probably come around eventually. Don't be put off if they are initially dismissive or tell you they are fine, just leave the option to talk open.

“If you ever want to ask me anything, I will try and answer.”

“I'm here if you are worried about anything.”