Talking to children and young people about COVID-19

If you're a parent or carer, you've probably already spoken to your child or young person about COVID-19 – but now that pupils are being sent home from school, the situation could feel more 'real' for them.

As things change, children and young people may develop new questions or worries. Teenagers who use social media more independently might come across different things at different times – including distressing news stories and misinformation.

Here's how you can continue to put their mind at ease, without downplaying the severity of the situation.

The earlier, the better

There's lots of confusing and conflicting information, so it's a good idea to chat early and often. Pick moments when you have their attention – but you don't necessarily need to sit down and have formal conversations. You might prefer to weave it into something you're already doing together, like bath time or bedtime – or lunch if they're a bit older. You don't need all the answers, either – opening up conversations now will let them know that they can come to you with questions later.

Listen to their concerns

Check in regularly about what they've heard and how they're feeling. Whether they know someone affected by the virus, have seen something distressing online, or are worrying about older family members, remind them that you're there to listen and respond to their concerns.

They might focus on things that sound trivial at first, like missing the end-of-school party. But these are big events in their lives – especially if they're due to leave primary or secondary school this year – so they will be feeling them very deeply.

And if you're worried about anything yourself, don't feel like you have to hide your feelings. Just reassure them that you'll work through everything as a family.

Give them the facts – but don't scare them

Things change, so keep reading the latest COVID-19 guidance (http://bit.ly/2wb3oCk). The situation has been labelled a pandemic by the World Health Organization – which means it's a problem all over the world – and will probably affect our lives for the foreseeable future.

Older children might be watching the news with you or getting information online. Your little ones will be relying on you to make sense of a confusing situation. Whatever their age and however they are hearing the news, it's important to help them understand the facts without scaring them.

Explain that the government is doing what it can to keep people safe, but we all need to do our bit to help out. As you normally would, be guided by your child or young person – some might want every detail, while others would be freaked out by too much information.

Separate truths from myths together

COVID-19 is all over the internet and it can be difficult to separate truths from myths. Remind them that not all social media posts are accurate. Because some people are worried and scared, they might accidentally share things that are untrue or misleading.

Encourage them to think critically about what they read and watch. Because everyone wants to know the latest about the pandemic, some content is designed to grab people's attention – but it might not be up to date, or based in fact. Whether they're young or in their teens, encourage them to ask key questions: do I think the person that wrote this has all the facts? Why are they writing it? Is it up to date?

Find ways to keep yourselves informed as a family, using reliable and age-appropriate sources. On social media, people can learn different things at different times – but this way, you'll know that everyone in the house has the core facts.

Explain what they can do to help

Most children and young people are not in the 'at-risk' category but can still carry the virus without showing symptoms – so remind them what they can do to avoid spreading it. We don't know all the ways COVID-19 spreads but, like similar viruses, it's mostly through cough droplets.

Make sure they cough into their elbow pits, avoid direct contact with people who appear unwell and wash their hands regularly. They should use soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds – that's roughly the time it takes to sing the happy birthday song twice! If they haven't washed their hands for a while, remind them not to touch their eyes, nose or mouth.

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Put their minds at ease

Understandably, many children and young people are concerned about how COVID-19 will affect them and their families. Although it's important not to trivialise the situation, remind them that most people their age are not in the 'at-risk' category so if they're careful, they'll probably be fine themselves.

If they're worried about you and other adult relatives getting infected, let them know that you appreciate their concern – it's good that they're taking the situation seriously. Reiterate the importance of the steps they're already taking to avoid spreading the virus. Small things like staying in and washing hands regularly make a big difference when everyone does them.

Trust yourself

You know your child or young person better than anyone, so you know what works best for them. It might be difficult to assume the role of an expert when explaining what's going on, but remember that it's fine to admit that you don't know everything – what's important is that you are supportive and positive. This, like everything else, will pass – and yes, they will have to go back to school.

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