

## How to Talk to Children about COVID-19

Sam Cartwright-Hatton, Professor of Clinical Child Psychology.  
Abby Dunn, Research Fellow.

University of Sussex, and Sussex Partnership NHS Trust.

It's a worrying time, isn't it? At the Flourishing Families Clinic, we spend all our time thinking about how parents can raise happy, confident children, when they themselves are anxious. At the moment, you don't have to be a particularly anxious person to be feeling worried and upset. So, what have we learned about keeping children on an even keel, when you yourself are not? Here are some tips that we think might help in the current situation. We are using ourselves with our own children.

### Should I talk to my children about this...?

Yes, DO talk about it. It is tempting to try to shield children from knowing about frightening things. But, chances are they've heard it about it school, or even nursery. And, in all likelihood, they will have heard things that have scared them. They've also probably heard things that are just plain wrong – rumours and myths do seem to flourish in playgrounds. So, DO answer any questions that your children ask. And if they don't ask any questions, try starting a conversation with them: *"Have you heard anything about this new bug that is going round?"*. Keep your tone casual and light. Try to keep the worry out of your voice and out of your face.

### What do I say...?

Start by finding out what they know. And by this, we mean, what they *think* they know... Ask open questions such as *"What are the kids at school saying? What do you think about it?"* If they're carrying round any weird ideas (*"Mr Smith the PE teacher has got it, and if you go near him YOU WILL DIE"*), you can then set them straight!

### How much detail do I go into...?

The general and not very helpful advice that we always give to parents is to give just enough, but not too much. By this, we mean, listen to your child and just answer the question they are asking. If your six year old has asked how you catch COVID-19, they don't need an undergraduate-level seminar in virology. Just a few words about germs getting on our fingers and into our mouths. And if they asked about how you catch it, you don't need to start telling them about fatality rates – save that for if/when they ask. Which brings us to our next question...

### How honest should I be...?

If your child asks a straightforward question about the risk of dying, do answer it. If you fudge the issue, they will make up an answer themselves and chances are it will be worse than the truth. But, again, read your child a bit, and try to give just what they *need* to know. So, a seven year old doesn't need to know chapter-and-verse on percentage estimates. A teenager may want detailed information and benefit from a discussion of it. But, for a

younger child, a simple *“most people will be just fine, but some people get very poorly and need to go to hospital and sadly, some people will die.”*

### **How much reassurance should I give...?**

Give plenty of reassurance. In particular, make it very clear that children and teenagers are extremely unlikely to get very ill – a cough or a sore throat at worst. At time of writing, we don't believe that any child under 10 has died anywhere in the world. If you, yourself, are youngish and reasonable healthy, you can also give some assurance that you are also *very unlikely* to get seriously ill. However, be wary of giving absolute guarantees. For instance, it is very tempting to say *“Oh Granny and Grandpa will be fine, I promise!”* The chances are that they will be fine, but if they are not, then it might be difficult for your child to trust your assurances in future.

### **Let your kids see you in control**

Let your children see that you are taking steps to control the situation – feeling that your parents know what they are doing is very reassuring. So, maybe you can take everyone's temperature in the morning, and remind everyone to wash their hands lots. But, try to do these things calmly – giving an air that it's all under control, rather than a vibe that you are panicking! Even better, let your kids get involved in preparations. Maybe they can take their own temperature, or disinfect a few doorknobs. This will help them feel in control too.

### **Is there anything I shouldn't tell my kids...?**

In general, we say that honesty is the best policy – if a child asks a question, it is best to answer it, even if you do so quite simply. However, we do advise that you keep young children (up to the age of about 10) away from all sources of news. We say this all the time – not just when there is a scary story in the news. Children just don't need that level of information. They can't put it into context, and they definitely don't need some of the scare stories that are out there. Turn off the TV and radio when the news comes on, or when people start talking about the coronavirus. Don't leave newspapers lying around.

After about the age of 10 (you know your own child best) we usually say it's OK to see a little careful news – CBBC Newsround is good for taking a calm, child-centred approach. But, watch it with them, and be ready to discuss anything that it brings up.

If your child uses the internet, be aware that there are a lot of horrible, scary stories out there. You have probably got quite good at filtering out the most ridiculous bits, but they haven't learnt how to do that yet. Keep a close eye on what they are viewing.

### **How do I help my kids deal with the big life changes...?**

If there are going to be big life changes, explain these to kids, again keeping a calm and practical tone of voice. So, if Granny has decided to self-quarantine for a few months, do tell your child this and explain why. Explain that it is a good thing that Granny is doing this to look after herself. Explain that you will chat to Granny lots on the phone and Skype.

If you can, get your children on board with any changes that are happening in your family. So, for example, one of us (SCH) has explained the need to reduce social contact to her 10-year old, and then asked her to think of ways that she could reduce her social contact. She suggested cutting circus skills this week, and then trampolining next week. In all probability, both will have been cancelled within days, but if not, she 'owns' this decision. This will hopefully mean less moaning about not being able to go, and a gives her a small feeling of control over the situation.

At Flourishing Families, we are always looking for opportunities for 'emotion coaching'. These are times when a child experiences a strong emotion, such as anger and fear. It is only through experiencing these feelings that children can learn to deal with them – with our help. So, one of us (AD) has been using her child's upset at a cancelled Easter holiday to help her daughter talk about, understand, and tolerate frustration and disappointment.

### **What if we get locked down...?**

Children will react to a lockdown in different ways. Some will see it as an adventure, and if so, go with that! Others will take it as a sign of impending doom and will need more reassurance. If your child takes it badly, to try to keep the daily routine going as much as possible – same time to get up, same to go to bed. Do a bit of schoolwork if you like. But, spot the opportunity here - use it as a real chance to re-connect as a family. We are all so busy usually – most children say that they don't get enough time with their parents. Well, here's your chance! Play silly games, watch films together, read to them. Encourage them to take control and find ways of making new types of fun – can you play Monopoly over Skype...? Who knows – give it a go! Have fun and try to find the silver lining – if you can do that in a situation like this, you are teaching your children a truly wonderful lesson.

Children need a lot of exercise. If they don't get enough, they can get antsy and stressed and badly behaved. This might be difficult to arrange in a lockdown. Get them out in the garden if you have one – kick a ball around, bounce on the trampoline, do cartwheels. If not, see if you can find some fun dance videos online and do them together in the sitting room.

Children need a lot of play. They really do NEED it. If you've got more than one child and they play well together, great. If you haven't, then you may need to get stuck in yourself. Playing with kids can be unbelievably dull, but dive in and try to do it. They really, really need it! With older kids, you might be able to arrange some Skype playdates.

### **What if I am feeling really anxious...?**

Many of us are feeling quite anxious at the moment. But what if you are really struggling? The first advice is talk, talk, talk. Call a friend, Skype your sister, talk to your partner. But, try to make sure that your children do not overhear these conversations. Little ears are surprisingly good at hearing things (when they want to...) so if you are having a big worry session, make absolutely sure no children can overhear.

When we feel anxious, it is very easy to become over-protective, and this is quite bad for kids. The problem is, at the moment, we are all having to be quite protective about things –

keeping clean, social contact, staying healthy. Make a big effort to stop this protectiveness from spilling over into other areas of your child's life. It's still OK to swing upside-down from the climbing frame if that's what they normally do. It's still OK to be out of sight for a few minutes, if that's what they normally do. In other words, try to be the same parent you would usually be.

If you find talking to your kids about the coronavirus too upsetting, it's OK – delegate to someone else. Get your partner to do it, or your friend – anyone who you can trust to talk calm good sense.

### **What if my child is very anxious...?**

If your child is really struggling, here are some extra things that you can do.

- Whenever there is something scary in the news, we tell parents and children to 'look for the helpers'. So, rather than focusing on the virus, focus on the nurses and doctors who are working really hard to help people get better. Look at the scientists who are working really hard to come up with a cure. Look at the cleaners who are working really hard to keep everywhere clean and germ-free. Everyone is working together to try to sort this problem out.
- Reassure them (and yourself) that it's OK to feel worried. We all feel worried at times – it's a normal human emotion. But if it really does get too much and you feel as if they are constantly worrying and looking for reassurance, you could try 'worry time'. This is a technique that we use with kids who are real worriers. It's where the parent and the child agree a time each day that will be 'worry time'. Say, 5pm, just before dinner. Then, for 20-30 minutes, sit down with your child and let them worry to their heart's content. Your job is mostly to listen. If there is a worry that you can easily resolve, do so. But, mostly listen and be sympathetic. Then outside of that time, when your child starts worrying, gently ask them to save the worry to 'worry time'. It can be a good way of getting children to start feeling a bit of control over their worries.
- Do something positive to help the situation. Helping other people is a really good way of dealing with a bad situation. It releases feel-good chemicals in our brain and makes us feel more in control. So, with your child, think of what you can do to help other people. Could you make a small donation to the local foodbank (most take cash online, if your own supplies are running low)? Can you phone an elderly neighbour and offer to get shopping for them? Do ask your child if they have any ideas.
- Do some meditation or relaxation exercises. There are tons of these on the internet. Find something aimed at children and then do it together.
- Do something fun! Fun is a great distraction – play a game, bounce on the trampoline, bake a cake. Whatever floats your child's boat.

Finally, if you have read this, you are clearly a good parent. You are making your child's wellbeing a priority at this difficult time. Remember, when they have caring parents, children are *incredibly* resilient. They will be fine!