

# Supporting Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak



## Introduction

As adults, many of us will be preoccupied in many different ways about what is happening with COVID-19. An additional stress is that we may be feeling unsure how to respond to how our children are feeling. The changes to our daily lives may have an emotional and mental impact on our children now, or in the weeks to come. It is important to take care of your family's mental health and there's lots you can do to help!

This starts with you – making sure that your take care of your own mental health and wellbeing is so important. Children react to what they see around them. If you feel you need help, please visit:

[Guidance for the Public on Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) or [Every Mind Matters](#)

## Children are aware of change

Children will likely be experiencing major changes to their daily routines during the COVID-19 outbreak and research shows that children, even as young as 2 years old, are aware of changing situations around them. It is important that when talking to children, the information needs to consider their age and level of understanding.

Children need to be given honest information about changes. Without this, they will try to make sense of it themselves. It is worth knowing that between 4 and 7 years, a child's understanding can be influenced by magical thinking – where a child believes thoughts, wishes or unrelated actions can cause external events – like an illness is caused by their thoughts or a particular behaviour.

## Examples of how children might react to change

For example, a child might blame themselves for COVID-19 because they were unhygienic, or that the illness is a punishment for bad behaviour. So, it is important to understand what children believe about how COVID-19 is spread so they don't feel frightened or guilty.

Children also pick up on adults' emotional states and changes to their lives – if their parents and carers are behaving differently and this is not explained to them, it can lead to anxiety. And acting out behaviour by the child.

It is important to know that anxiety can present itself in different ways – it's not just about being tearful, sad or worried. It could be presented as being challenging or being argumentative. They might be struggling to sleep, or have physical symptoms like a stomach ache or bed-wetting. Look out for any changes in behaviour.

## The importance of speaking to your child

It is important that parents and carers have conversations with children about their emotions and share how they are feeling, so they are not dealing with difficult feelings alone. The best thing is to be honest about the uncertainty of the pandemic, and the challenges this has on our minds, without overwhelming children with their own fears.

Balance this with explaining to children how there are people working together around the world to find medicines for this virus and to keep people safe and make them better, but this will take some time which is why we all have to be careful and stay home so we keep ourselves and others safe.

# Supporting Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak



This gives an explanation to the child about what they are seeing and experiencing, but also allows children to talk freely about their own feelings. Their emotions can be normalised by reassuring children about how the family will look after each other – this will ease anxiety and provide a shared focus.

## SOME TOP TIPS

1. Look after your own mental health!
2. Be aware of your own reactions – children often take cues from adults in their lives, so try to manage your emotions, be calm, listen, acknowledge their concerns.
3. Find ways to manage your stress and have outlets away from children to discuss your stresses and concerns. Beware of flapping ears!
4. Acknowledge when your children are behaving differently. Recognise that bad and challenging behaviour may be associated with anxiety.
5. Talk to your children about how they are feeling, and how you are feeling, but be cautious not to overwhelm them with your own fears.
6. Give children all the love and attention they need. A cuddle can defuse a tantrum.
7. Reassure children about how the family will look after each other.
8. Explain what is happening with the pandemic and be honest about it – tell them that what is being done is to keep them and their friends and family safe.
9. Explain what things we have to do to keep us safe, like washing hands regularly.
10. Explain clearly to them what has caused the pandemic, and what the situation is, so they understand it is nothing to do with them.
11. Ensure you use reliable sources of information from GOV.UK or NHS websites – misinformation can cause additional stress.
12. Tell your children to ask questions and give them honest answers. Speak kindly and calmly.
13. Check what they are thinking about it all so you correct any knowledge errors and fill in any knowledge gaps.
14. Know that you won't always be able to answer all their questions, but acknowledge them and listen to their feelings so they feel supported.
15. Create a new routine – this will give them the feeling of safety in the context of uncertainty. Make Monday to Friday more structured and focused on time-limited activities like they would be used to within a nursery or school timetable.
16. Limit their exposure to media and talk about anything they have seen or heard. Watching repeated coverage of the outbreak may cause anxiety. Avoid turning off the TV or closing webpages if they come into a room as this may pique their interest and their imagination may take over.
17. Be aware they may hear things from friends and social media.
18. If your child has access to information on social media, speak to them about the source of the information they are reading, and the impact of reading and reposting articles that may be sensationalist or even fake news.
19. Children of different ages may react differently. For example:
  - Infants to 2 years old – they may become more easily distressed. Cry more or want to be cuddled more.
  - 3-6 years old – may return to behaviours they have outgrown. Eg bed-wetting, toileting accidents, tantrums, difficulty sleeping.
  - 7-10 years old – may feel sad, angry or afraid; or have trouble concentrating.
  - Pre-teens and teenagers – may act out; reckless driving, alcohol or drug use; afraid to leave home; lose connection with their friends; may be overwhelmed; emotional with more arguing and fighting; worried about exams.

# Supporting Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak



What you may be experiencing with your children is probably a normal reaction to an abnormal situation so don't be worried that they are showing mental health problems or are being damaged in some way.

It is important to normalise an anxiety reaction to uncertainty. However, if you do feel concerned about your children's behaviour you can find support and advice via several charity organisations such as Young Minds, Action for Children and Family Lives.

For more information click here on how to support [children's mental health](#) during the outbreak.

## Helplines and websites for your child or young person

If your child or young person would like to speak to someone anonymously, they could try calling a helpline or visiting websites such as ChildLine and The Mix.

Shout provides free, confidential support, 24/7 via text for anyone at crisis anytime, anywhere.

### You can:

- text **SHOUT** to **85258** in the UK to text with a trained Crisis Volunteer
- text with someone who is trained and will provide active listening and collaborative problem-solving

ChildLine provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with a problem. It comforts, advises and protects.

### You can:

- call **0800 1111** any time for free
- have an online chat with a counsellor
- check out the message boards

The Mix provides a free confidential telephone helpline and online service that aims to find young people the best help, whatever the problem.

### You can:

- call **0808 808 4994** for free – lines are open from 11am to 11pm every day
- access the online community
- email The Mix

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following people for their generous and knowledgeable input:

Professor Tanya Byron

Dr Linda Papadopoulos