

Family communication during the COVID-19 outbreak

A guide for keyworker parents and carers to talk to children

How to talk

Does your family talk lots or a little about worries and feelings? What family / cultural / spiritual ideas do you draw on when talking about worrying things?

How did you talk when worrying things happened in the past? What's the question you most dread your child asking?

- Reflect on your past experiences about what works and what you might do differently in this current situation.

When and where to talk

Do you usually talk best in the car or on the bus, or at bedtime?

- Keep opening up a space in which child might ask questions. It doesn't matter if the child doesn't make use of the space, the important thing is for them to know that the space is there.

Practice and support

- Rehearse answers to the questions you most dread.
- Share your child's worries with a relative or friend, so that they can also support your child.
- You can also use support groups.

Creating a context to talk

- Focus on what the child needs – if you aren't sure what they are asking, explore their question, don't avoid.
- Wonder out loud how they might be feeling.
- Be realistic and optimistic, tell the truth in a way that a child can understand.
- Acknowledge that living through a pandemic is a scary time, and that lots of people have big messy feelings; that both children and adults might have feelings they don't understand and that this is very normal.

Dealing with tricky questions

- Let your child know that you might be a bit more grouchy than usual and that this is not to do with them but to do with the situation. Let your child know that it's OK to talk to you and to other trusted adults about their worries
- Children are brilliant at overhearing adult conversations – be aware that they may have heard something you didn't want them to. Find ways of acknowledging things that you might have said that could cause worry.

It's always better to talk

- Not all conversations will go well. It's better to try, to be clumsy and to try again. Tricky conversations take practice and you'll learn together through this.

Developmentally-attune conversations

Is your child usually curious, do they find facts reassuring? Are they usually reluctant to verbalise their fears?

- Children mature at very different rates and process information differently. If your child has additional needs they might express their worries in ways that are harder to spot. They might need a social story or a visual timetable to help them understand.
- For older children and teenagers, ask about social media and where they get their COVID-19 information. They may be reading fake news.
- Fears and worries might look like storming out of the room, shouting and swearing, finding it hard to stay in the house. These are all emotional expressions. Try to meet the emotion calmly and use parenting strategies you usually find to work. Focus on what you can control, acknowledging what you can't.
- Older children might be proud that you continue to go to work to look after people – celebrate this together!

Questions children might ask

Are you going to catch Covid-19? It's possible.

Who will look after me if you can't? This needs a straight answer and will depend on your individual circumstances.

Will you die? It's very unlikely that I will die but it's possible I will get sick for a while.

Why do you have to be a keyworker? It's a job I enjoy / am good at / take pride in / pays money for us to eat and live.

Why can't you stay at home like my friends' parents? Because I have an important job looking after people.

Why do I have to go to school? So that you can be safely looked after when I am at work .

Is it safe to go to school? Yes, and it helps me to know that you are safe while I'm at work. Ask what the child has learnt to keep themselves safe when out of the house at school.

If it's safe to go to school, why can't I go out with my friends? I know it's hard not seeing your friends. Teachers can help you keep a safe distance away from each other at school. Mixing with people increases the risk of viral transmission so the best way to reduce the number of people who get infected is to reduce mixing with people.

When will the lockdown end? We don't know but it won't be for ever. The government is talking to scientists to make decisions about when we can safely start ordinary life again.

Are you safe? Yes, I'm as safe as anyone can be and I know what to do to keep myself safe at work.

It's OK to say you don't know and that you will find out, but do come back to the subject if only to give an update that you still don't know.