

Reassuring children and young people who are worried about coronavirus: advice for parents and carers



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Many parents and carers are concerned about how their children, whatever their age, are feeling at present. It is understandable that children and young people may be feeling anxious and upset.

The support provided by our families, and those networks around us, is something we all value. Taking time to listen to each other's concerns – which may be similar or different to our own – is particularly key in relation to children and young people, who may feel overwhelmed by a complex and changing situation which isn't being clearly explained for their perspective. Be curious about what's on their mind, so they feel able to speak to you in their own time and in their own way.

If you are the parent or carer of a baby or toddler, you may think they won't be affected by current concern about the coronavirus - or indeed other events of national importance. A younger child may find it hard to tell you what is going through their mind, but you may notice that they repeatedly play or draw about the event to let you know they're thinking about it.

We know that babies and toddlers pick up on how we are feeling, and that the anxiety which a parent is feeling could have an impact on them. Try to be aware of this in how you behave around them. A baby or toddler may well sense a change in your mood, or if you are distracted and therefore less attentive towards them. Reassure them in your actions and through the affection you show towards them. Younger children feel safer when their world is predictable and familiar, so keeping things as normal as possible and maintaining their usual routines can be extremely helpful.

If you are the parent or carer of a child, they will also pick up on how you are feeling - both in the way you talk openly (or don't) about worrying issues and in the way you behave. If they see you visibly worried or alarmed, this may prompt them to feel the same. Where possible, try to reassure your child, while also being open so they trust you to be honest with them. Though it may not always be easy, when parents and carers deal with a situation calmly they can provide the best support for children.

There are practical things you can do. Pay close attention to your child's individual worries, whenever they choose to express them. These might seem trivial, but the change to routine itself (e.g. plans for the weekend being cancelled) may be what unsettles them. Concerns for the health of an elderly grandparent are understandable, and reassurance around what practical steps are being taken to keep people healthy can help. Of course, hand washing is something which children need to see their parents and carers doing, and this can be done as a shared activity.

Watching trusted news sources will play a part in helping children to feel informed and aware of the situation (for instance www.bbc.co.uk/newsround, including their advice on coronavirus). But if this starts to dominate, particularly via social media, it may well be unhelpful to a child who is trying to understand a complex situation. The same applies to children seeing the adults around them constantly watching the news, with normal family life being put 'on hold'. This can in itself create alarm.



If you are the parent or carer of a teenager, the above also applies. We know that, in their teenage years, young people can distance themselves from their parents and look more to their peers for support. This can be enormously important as they begin to navigate the world independently. Encourage them to keep looking to these trusted friendships. But also, be mindful that looking to peer support alone can create a pressure on young people to 'have all the answers', including sifting inaccurate news which may reach them via social media and elsewhere.

The support of trusted adults will also play a key role at times of uncertainty. As the parent of a teenager, it may be difficult to know just how worried they really are. They may be just waiting for an opportunity to share their worries, so don't assume they won't want to talk to you. Sometimes, talking can be easier through a shared activity like walking the dog or baking a cake – which is also important in reinforcing that we can continue to do the things we've always done and which we enjoy. Most of all, keep connecting with your child.

Do this in different ways, as this in itself will help you both to work out how you can provide support. Make it clear you are there for them. Stay in touch with how they're feeling. It's not helpful for children and young people to be anxious all the time, so be alert to this and to them possibly needing more support from you if this becomes the case.

Finally, as a parent or carer, look after your own mental health too. This will enable you to best support yourself and those you care about.

For more information and advice about looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak, visit www.annafreud.org/coronavirus