



## Advice for parents during the Coronavirus outbreak

It is very easy to feel overwhelmed by everything you are hearing, seeing and reading about Coronavirus (COVID-19). As shared public spaces and schools close, flights are grounded and countries across the globe close their borders, it is understandable that anxiety, panic and stress levels are rising. Children therefore might be feeling worried too – and this is okay. They might find it difficult to understand what is happening and why things are different to ‘normal’. Having open conversations can increase understanding, reduce those feelings of anxiety and worry, and help them cope better over the next few months. The information below will hopefully help you as you parent your children during this very unusual and unsettling time.

### How to talk to your child

#### Ask them what they already know

Make sure you are in a safe environment and allow your child to talk freely. Always begin conversations by asking them what they already know or what they have already heard from the news, teachers or friends. Start by listening and then acknowledge what they have said.

“Goodness me, that sounds very frightening. That there is a virus that is going to make everyone sick and end up in hospital. It must have worried you hearing that”.

Then move on and correct any information that they have shared that is not factual.

“That is not true – not everyone will end up in hospital. Most people who catch coronavirus will get a mild cough and temperature and will get better quickly.”

Ask them if they have any questions and remember that it is okay to not answer a question straight away. It is okay to say something like “that is a really good question and because of this I want to make sure I give you a good answer.” This gives you time and breathing space to process what they have just asked, and come up with a sensible, factual response.

#### Give age-appropriate information

Children have a right to truthful information about what is going on in the world, but parents and carers also have a responsibility to keep them safe from distress as much as possible. A tough balance right? Most importantly, don’t avoid their concerns or make their worries feel silly. Reassure them that it is natural to feel scared about this. Remind them that the grownups in their lives have got this and that they are safe.

Try and make talking fun where possible and use arts, crafts and interactive science experiments to help explain things to children. YouTube have videos where people use black pepper to describe how germs stick to your hands for example.

Drawings and games will help engage your children, and will naturally put them in a more relaxed mode, which will hopefully encourage talking.

Use concrete facts from reliable sources (WHO/NHS/PHA websites) and talk in short sentences.

End conversations with care and an act of love or kindness. Physical touch always reassures children that you are there for them. Remind your children that you are there to have conversations with. All of these things will help them feel safe.

### **Teach and model healthy habits**

Teach children that this virus spreads when someone who is sick coughs or sneezes. The best way therefore to stop the spread of the virus is regular hand washing. Encourage handwashing together – using a song or dance can help make this fun. You can also show children how to cover a cough or a sneeze with their elbow, and how to catch a sneeze with a tissue and throw it in the bin.

You need to do all of these things too – in front of your children. Children are much more likely to copy a parent or another adult, than do something because you have asked them to do it.

Limiting physical contact (social distancing) is believed to be key to preventing the spread of Coronavirus. We appreciate that this is going to be one of the hardest parts of this outbreak. Children are likely to find this incredibly hard too. They will miss going to see family and friends (especially grandparents), they will miss going to school, parks, play centres, shops, cafes and parties, and they will miss going to their clubs and activities. Acknowledge their sad/angry/disappointed/frustrated feelings with them, and let them be upset about not being able to do these things. Say things like “it is okay to cry about your party getting cancelled – I am very sad too. It is okay to be sad - it is very disappointing for you and all of your friends.” Comfort them with physical touch. And then once the initial feelings have been acknowledged, be creative about what outdoor, or at home, activities you might be able to do instead.

And just like good hygiene practices – it is important that the children in your lives see you also limiting social contact and outings. You might still need to attend work when you are able to, and this might be difficult for children to make sense of. Try to explain why you need to go to work – to provide food, cleaning services, health or social care, transport to those that need it. Allow them to ask questions about why this still needs to happen.

### **How to cope as a parent**

#### **Work through your own worry**

You will be able to help your own children better if you are also coping. Children easily pick up on anxiety and stress, so it is helpful if you can stay calm. Adults set the emotional tone for their children and anxiety, panic and stress are contagious. If you are finding it hard to stay calm and relaxed, which is understandable in this situation, try and tune into what exactly is causing you to feel anxious. Is the news making you feel worse? – Then turn it off. Is talking about coronavirus heightening the worry for you? – Then ask family to talk about something else for a while. If it is the fear of something happening to your children or other family members – then arm yourself with knowledge and facts (from a couple of reliable, reputable sources). Often if you feel informed, you feel more in control. This in turn should help reduce the levels of anxiety and panic you are experiencing.

Help yourself by trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle – healthy food and good sleep practices will contribute to this. Try and reduce the feelings of isolation and worry by talking to friends and family on the phone in the evening time when children are in bed. Scheduling some fresh air and exercise (even a short walk/scoot/cycle around the block) into your families' day will also help.

### **Reduce exposure to the TV and social media**

If children hear too much information from the news they might start to worry unnecessarily. There is a lot of talk about people dying from the virus and, although this is true, children need to be reminded that most people will recover from it and won't need to see a doctor or go to hospital. The news is designed to entertain adults – and is not made for the eyes and ears of children. We are not recommending that children are sheltered from what is happening in the world, but they do not need to hear about everything that is happening. They do not need to hear adults talking continuously about the latest Coronavirus developments. This will cause unnecessary anxiety. Constantly scrolling on your phone probably won't help you feel any better either. Try and take regular breaks from both the news on the TV and your phone. This should have a positive impact on both your children's emotional health and your own.

One of the biggest challenges ahead, apart from managing the spread of Coronavirus, is the fallout that will come from social media. There have already been some big 'fake news' stories trending on social media about Coronavirus. Articles that contain fictional advice have been shared countless times, and this kind of irresponsible press will, unfortunately, result in people ignoring official guidance and advice on how best to look after yourself and your family. As hard as it is, try to avoid Facebook/Instagram/Twitter posts that do not come from official health and or government websites. Not everything you read on social media is true.

Please have conversations with older children about responsible social media use during this difficult time. Remind them to always be kind and always think before sharing or commenting on anything. Remind them that they can mute specific posts, followers and hashtags if they are feeling overwhelmed by anything.

### **What can you do next?**

#### **Keep routine and structure**

Children love routine and thrive on predictability, but unfortunately for them, the impact of Coronavirus is going to result in many of their daily routines and structures being severely disrupted. If schools close for a long period, then their whole lives are going to feel very fragmented indeed. Try and stick to a 'soft' timetable Monday to Friday as much as you can whilst the children are off school. This does not mean suddenly becoming a home-school educator, or quickly swatting up on the whole curriculum for the school year. It means sitting down with your child/children each morning and coming up with some sort of routine for the day ahead. Work out together when the best time for some fresh air might be and when it would be okay to watch TV or play on a device. You can also think about when might be a good time to do the worksheets their teachers sent over, or do some reading or art work. Remember to schedule in snack breaks and lunchtime (as if your child would let you forget!). We all know a hungry child is often a grumpy child due to blood sugar slumps and lack of energy. Working out a routine does not however mean developing a strict timetable. Jotting down a list each morning of the things that need to be done that day, and ticking them off as you do them, is enough.

There are lots of free online education resources – and these are being shared widely on social media. This is great, and it is wonderful that there is so much at our fingertips ready to use online.

But please also remember the simple things in life when planning your days. Children love colouring, reading, music, craft, baking, and exploring outside. A 20 minute explore outside might be just as educational and interactive as a website tutorial.

Most importantly please do not put unnecessary pressure on yourself to be anything other than a parent to your child. You do not need to feel that you are not good enough – YOU ARE.

### **Take positive action**

Try and remind children that it is everyone's job to try and stop the spread of the virus, but that it is definitely not their responsibility to prevent the people around them getting sick. Tell your child that we can all get through hard things – and although this situation is especially challenging – remind them that difficult things make us stronger people. Share stories about times when you found something hard (and you didn't think you were going to succeed) and how you managed to get through it. What did you learn from this and what words of wisdom might your child appreciate hearing?

Sadly, lots of children are not going to be able to see their grandparents and other older relatives for a period of time. This will be very hard for children to understand, especially for those children who are used to being looked after by their grandparents whilst parents work. Like previous guidance – acknowledge their feelings about this and allow them to express them. Share your feelings of sadness too – it is okay to show emotion and feeling with your child. Make frequent phone calls, and if their grandparent is in total isolation go and see them through their window. Get your child to do pictures and letters for them, as they will also be missing your children. Send photos and videos if possible – we are fortunate that in this digital age not all contact will end. It might not be physical contact, but we do not need to isolate ourselves totally.

Encourage your child to 'look for the helpers' when talking about the current situation. There are always those people who help – the supermarket workers spending all night stocking the shelves, the nurses and doctors looking after the sick, and the people who are having to carry on in their jobs as fire-fighters, care workers for the elderly, postmen....the list goes on. Think together about how you could become a 'helper' too. Could you send notes to neighbours who are in isolation asking if they need anything? Could your child draw pictures for people in isolation? Donate to the local food bank if you can, or just be mindful when shopping about those who might have less than you. And if you are one of those families in need, then please reach out for help and support. Ask for the things you need and hopefully there will be 'helpers' there for you too.

These are unprecedented times and the world is facing something extraordinary, but this doesn't have to mean that good can't happen for you and your children. Use the time at home together to strengthen relationships. Use the time to build memories – together. Play games, read, play outside, dance, sing, create and most importantly laugh and hug. Do those things and your children will feel safe and loved. And that is what matters.

### **Psychological Services**

**Belfast Health & Social Care Trust**

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