



## Supporting children and young people's emotional wellbeing during Covid-19: A guide for parents and carers

Authored by:

Rosie Lenihan (Resilience Worker) under supervision of Dr Gwen O'Connor (Clinical Psychologist)

In these difficult times there has been many big changes to our daily lives: the new norm for family life now may include working from home, schooling your child and maintaining social distancing. All of which could understandably leave you feeling anxious and overwhelmed. It is also understandable that children might be feeling anxious, scared and confused; all perfectly normal reactions to such big changes. But might mean children are asking many more questions and needing plenty of reassurance at this time.

There is a lot of information on Covid-19 which can leave you feeling swamped trying to choose reliable sources and identifying facts that are age appropriate for your child. The following guidance has been gathered to provide parents and carers with reliable practical tips on how to effectively support your child's emotional wellbeing whilst taking care of yourselves too (self-care). This can be an excellent opportunity to help teach your child a wide variety of skills such as regulating emotions (how we experience and manage emotions) and developing coping skills in times of uncertainties.

### Self-care

The first step in looking after your children is to take time to care for yourself; something that parents and carers often do not do well! Children will pick up quite easily how you are feeling as our emotions can be contagious. While it is ok for children to know adults are worried too, seeing adults overwhelmed with worry can be frightening for children so it can help to use strategies to calm and regulate yourself first (Hollingsworth & P. Bryson, 2020). Modelling how to manage your own worries plays an important role in helping your child make sense of their worries and develop skills to effectively regulate their emotions.

Regulating yourself can include taking time to do things that you enjoy and help you relax such as:

- Having a bath or a shower are good ways to create intentional space to recharge
- Going for a walk on your own or with a pet



- Exercise, whether intense like running or relaxing such as yoga
- Listening to music you enjoy
- Relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and mindfulness
- Reading a book when your child is in bed
- Distraction can also work well in reducing any heightened emotions such as watching a funny movie
- This might be the perfect time to get back to any hobbies you may have had before such as, knitting, hand crafts, jigsaw puzzles, crosswords etc.
- Reaching out to family, friends and neighbours can help you stay connected and supported
- Talking is the most important step you can take when you feel anxious to help regulate yourself. Try to arrange regular video/phone calls each week; if possible in private so as your little one's do not overhear your conversations, particularly if you are voicing concerns and worries
- Practice self-compassion and forgiveness: these are difficult times, and everybody is trying their best so don't be so hard on yourself. There will undoubtedly be good and not so good days, so avoid setting unrealistic goals and try being kind to yourself.
- Some immediate sensory regulatory tips for times you need to calm down quickly include making yourself a warm drink, take 3 slow deep breaths, giving yourself a hand massage or eat something crunchy (crisps, carrot sticks) or chewy (chewing gum, chewy candy), splashing your face with cold water.

### Supporting your child's emotional wellbeing

Children both young and old may respond to stress in different ways and sometimes feel unable to express what they are experiencing. Some show their worry or distress through becoming more emotional (upset, distressed, angry, anxious), through physical symptoms (stomach aches, headaches, minor pains) and/or behaviourally (becoming clingy, withdrawn, bed wetting, aggression).

- **Speak with your child:** it may be tempting to avoid talking about Covid-19 to protect your child from worrying. However, it's helpful to acknowledge that it's normal to have worries at this time and speaking to your child can allow you to gently correct any misinformation they may have heard. If your child is not asking any questions, try starting a conversation, being curious about what they might already know. Some phrases to help begin a conversation could include:

*"I guess you might have heard about"*



*“I am wondering what you know about all that is happening/why school finished early/why we can't go out?”*

- **Sharing Information:** information shared should depend on your child's age and stage of development. Try answering simple questions with factual information for example: if you are asked *“Are you going to die Mummy?”* explaining *“most people who get COVID-19 get better”*. It's also ok not to have all the answers and to explain that sometimes we don't know the answers and that's ok. Child friendly stories and animations can also help with sharing information, for example: The Resilience Project's videos for [Children](#) or [Teens](#), [Coronavirus: A Book for Children](#), [My Hero is You](#), [Talking to Children about Illness](#) (aged from 3 to 13+ years) and facts for [older children](#). Keep young children away from watching news and limit the amount of news older children are exposed to (Cartwright-Hatton & Dunn, 2020). Exposure to news can escalate worries for children and adults.
- **Listen and acknowledge:** Help children express their feelings; children may like to communicate through drawing pictures, stories and other activities. Giving them your full attention and avoiding minimising (for example *“it will be over soon”, “don't worry about it”*) their concerns is important. The [“Name it To Tame it”](#) (Dan Siegel, 2014) approach can help children to feel calm. Allow them to discuss their concerns (*“let's talk about it”*) and help them name the feelings they are experiencing (e.g. *“I wonder if you're feeling scared/sad/angry”*). This approach helps part of the brain responsible for calming emotions to come into play and make sense of the feeling “taming” it whilst giving the message that you are here to listen to them and that you will get through this together.
- **Social Distancing:** Explaining to your child that everybody, including their friends and family are choosing to stay safe and healthy by staying at home can help them understand social distancing while giving a sense of control. You could arrange to have video calls with their friends so that they can keep in touch, or try writing a letter to a friend. Older children may have mobile phones and can keep in contact with their friends regularly.
- **Reassurance:** children will need plenty of this! Should children ask about dying from Covid-19 you can explain that most young people do not become seriously ill. If parents are also fit and healthy it could be good to give reassurance that you should be ok, however avoid promising things that cannot be certain and may break your child's trust in future situations.
- **Routine:** maintaining routine and creating new routines where old routines aren't possible helps give children an increased feeling of safety and predictability. A daily routine may include morning routines such as getting up at the normal time, getting washed and dressed, eating breakfast together, chosen



leisure activities/school work/exercise (broken down into manageable chunks of time for example an hour or less), regular snack/break/lunch/dinner times, and an evening routine (some TV/reading time, bath time) with set [bedtimes](#). Regular family activities at the same time each day or week, such as having a movie night, board games, reading together or baking, practising gratitude (picking one thing you are grateful for that day), singing and dancing and writing letters to friends and family members that you may not see for a while can all create a sense of predictability and comfort for your child. These are also great opportunities to provide plenty of praise and affection for your child.

- **Regulating activities:** children may find it difficult to control their emotions and following behaviour in some situations and may need adults help them feel calm. For younger children cuddling, side to side rocking and bouncing can help, jumping and swinging work in the same way to calm older children. Breathing exercises for example blowing bubbles, [hand breathing](#) and [belly breathing](#) as well as [grounding techniques](#) are other ways to help children of all ages when they are struggling to manage emotions. Giving children a drink (through a straw), offering crunchy or chewy food (carrot sticks, biscuits, crisps, raisins) are also ways to help quickly regulate children, and work for parents too when are becoming stressed.
- **Nurture Relationships:** Being at home gives the opportunity to nurture relationships with your children. Having time with your children individually is important and can make them feel important, loved and secure. If you can, keep these times consistent with each child during the week so your child can look forward to this time. [Unicef](#) provide more tips for structuring one-to-one time with your child.
- **Schedule regular video/telephone calls:** regular calls and check in's with family or important adults in the child's life can help maintain connection and offer reassurance that important others are doing ok. Seeing family member's faces via video can help with the release of neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain) such as dopamine and serotonin, 'feel good' brain chemicals.

**Thanks for reading this!**

For more resources for parents, teachers, children and young people follow our You Tube channel:

Cardiff and Vale Resilience Project



**Resilience  
Project  
Prosiect  
Gwydnwch**



**For more tips, resources and ideas also see:**

Flourishing Families Clinic, accessed on 30/03/2020:

<https://www.flourishingfamiliesclinic.nhs.uk/How%20to%20Talk%20to%20Children%20about%20COVID.pdf>

World Economic Forum, accessed 02/04/2020:

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-covid19-communication-children-health/>

Unicef, accessed on 30/03/2020:

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

Emerging Minds, [accessed on 01/04/2020:](#)

<https://emergingminds.org.uk/recommended-resources-supporting-children-and-young-people-with-worries-and-anxiety-links/>

Wandering Minds, accessed on 30/03/2020:

[https://wanderingmindofapsychologist.com/2020/03/06/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-coronavirus/amp/?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://wanderingmindofapsychologist.com/2020/03/06/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-coronavirus/amp/?_twitter_impression=true)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed on 31/03/2020:

[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Fschoools-childcare%2Ftalking-with-children.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Fschoools-childcare%2Ftalking-with-children.html)

British Psychological Society, accessed on 30/03/2020:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-highlights-importance-talking-children-about-coronavirus>

Child Mind Institute, accessed on 30/03/2020:

<https://childmind.org/article/self-care-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>