

## Helping children to cope with uncertainty during COVID-19

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When it comes to deciding the **Oxford Word of the Year** for 2020, 'uncertainty' gets our vote. Just when it seemed Australia was over the worst of the pandemic, a new wave of COVID-19 cases seen border closures and self-quarantine rules return, bringing with them a fresh wave of anxiety and doubt.

As humans, we're hard-wired to seek control and guard against the possible dangers that come with uncertainty. This is great when it comes to dealing with potential physical dangers – if you're not sure what might be lurking around a dark street corner, you can choose to keep yourself safe by taking a different route. However, many of these possible threats are intangible uncertainties that we have little to no control over. This doesn't stop us from trying to control the situation, but often leaves us feeling exhausted, stressed and no closer to a solution.

### Uncertainty in children

Children are not immune to the effects of uncertainty. **Research** has shown 20-month-old infants can experience uncertainty, while children as young as 4.5 years old are able to identify uncertain situations, monitor their feelings of uncertainty, and ask for help in dealing with uncertain circumstances. However, while they may be able to recognise and respond to uncertainty from a young age, children under 12 years old haven't yet developed all of the skills needed to manage it.

Children need support and guidance from the adults in their lives to help them to understand and cope with change and uncertainty. **Neurodivergent children** in particular are vulnerable to increased anxiety in uncertain situations, which can disrupt the routines and repetitive behaviours that provide them with comfort and stability. Without support, children may develop an **'intolerance of uncertainty'**, which has been linked to anxiety and depression in later life.

The good news is there are some simple, easy ways you can help your child to cope with change and uncertainty (and possibly help yourself while you're at it).



### Understand and normalise their experience

Knowing what your child is worried about will put you in a better position to help them to cope with uncertainty. Listen to what your child is telling you about their thoughts and feelings and try to understand their experience. Be curious and ask questions about what they're thinking and feeling, the physical sensations they're experiencing, and the reasons behind their behaviour.

Let them know that it's okay to feel differently during times of uncertainty – in fact, it's completely normal – and remind them of all the ways in which you and the people around you are working to keep everyone safe.

If your child is non-verbal, you could try describing the thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviours you think they might be experiencing, based on what you've observed. For example, "I can see why you might be feeling scared about Mummy going back to work after we've been home together for so long. You might be worried that I'm going to get sick, which is giving you butterflies in your stomach. It feels a little strange for me too, but work has special rules in place to make sure everyone stays healthy. It means that when I am home, I'll be able to focus more on spending time with you, too."

## Talk about what's happening with them

It's natural to want to protect your child from the stress of uncertainty. However, while it might be tempting to tell them that 'everything is fine' and 'not to worry', dismissing their feelings can actually cause more harm than good. Being told things are 'fine' when their own physical and emotional experiences are telling them otherwise can affect a child's sense of trust and damage the parent-child relationship, which plays an important role in helping children to develop resilience.

Acknowledge the situation and talk to your child about what is happening in a way that is appropriate for their age. These fact sheets offer tips to help you talk to your **baby, toddler, primary school-aged child** or **teen** about 'tough times' and adversity. It's okay to admit that you don't know what might happen next but let them know you'll be there to support them through it.

Even children who might seem too young to understand, such as babies and toddlers, are very sensitive and responsive to their caregivers' emotions and tone of voice. Explaining the situation in a calm and caring way can help children to feel safe and secure and to make meaning of what is happening for them.

## Provide routines and a sense of control where possible

Children's emotions and behaviour are influenced by daily routines, such as having enough nutritious food, sleep, play time, learning and exercise. Predictable routines provide a stable base for children, particularly in times of stress.

While it can be hard to maintain routines during times of uncertainty, keeping daily life as 'normal' as possible can help children to feel more 'in control'. In addition, providing children with opportunities to take charge in their daily lives – such as letting them choose what kind of sandwich to have for lunch, or putting them in charge of new jobs around the house – can help to counteract the feelings of instability and loss of control that come with uncertainty.



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

## Help them to recognise and manage their emotions

'Emotional literacy' – the ability to recognise and name our emotions – is an important part of a child's development. Being able to recognise when they are feeling sad, angry or worried will help your child to choose the best way to cope with these feelings ('self-regulation').

Creative activities can be a great way of helping children to recognise, understand and manage their emotions. You could invite your child to draw a picture of how they're feeling; or create a **'feelings chart'** that allows them to point to the emotion they're experiencing. Role playing and storytelling can be useful ways to help older children talk about how they're feeling.

Children may struggle with disappointment as the rules around the pandemic continue to shift and change. Let them know it's okay to feel this way, but also use it as an opportunity to build their resilience by pointing out that you'll support each other through the bad news, and that good things will come once the virus passes.



## Ask what they want

Children, even young children, are experts in their own lives and have unique and valuable insights, knowledge and skills to share. Giving them the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect them can improve their self-esteem, increase their feelings of control and connectedness, enhance their problem-solving skills and capacity for decision making, and improve their relationships with adults and other young people.

Ask your child to imagine some ways in which they might navigate the potential challenges and uncertainties ahead. Work with them to think about ways they could adjust to and cope with possible changes and learn to thrive despite the uncertainty. Supporting children to take on personal challenges will help to build their self-confidence and independence, which in turn will increase their resilience (a key protective factor against developing mental health concerns later in life).

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## Make sure you're supported too

Parents are important role models for their children, acting as examples for how to handle life's challenges and worries. However, supporting a child during uncertain times can be challenging and exhausting, especially if you're struggling to cope with the ups and downs yourself.

To be a good role model for your child, it is important to take care of your own mental health and wellbeing. Some tips include:

- **Practice compassionate self-talk.** If you find things aren't going to plan, be kind to yourself. Think about how you might talk to a friend or a loved one in the same situation. Chances are the things you'd say to them are a lot kinder than what you might say to yourself!  
  
Try to recognise any critical thoughts or 'thinking errors', such as 'catastrophising' (believing something is or will be much worse than it actually is) and 'fortune telling' (believing you can predict what's going to happen in the future). Replace them with compassionate thoughts such as 'this will take time' or 'I've tried this before and it helped; we can try again tomorrow'. Also notice if you're holding yourself to any previous standards – of productivity, parenting, socialising, being – and do your best to let them go. This will make it easier to accept whatever 'new normal' you're experiencing and find ways to adapt.
- **Make time for relaxation.** Wherever possible, plan to do activities that you enjoy and that help you to feel calmer, such as mindfulness or meditation activities, exercise, hobbies, or spending time with friends. The free **Smiling Mind** app offers relaxed breathing exercises for both adults and children.
- **Talk to someone you trust.** While it's important to set a positive example for your children, it's impossible to remain strong all the time. Talking to a trusted friend, family member or professional about your concerns and disappointments can help you to come to terms with uncertainty. The more you are able to open up and talk with others, the more difficult emotions will (slowly but surely) disperse, leaving room for a more flexible approach to dealing with uncertainty.
- **Use these tips for yourself.** While the advice in this article has been given in the context of supporting children, a lot of it can be just as helpful for adults. Acknowledging the situation, normalising and allowing negative emotions, maintaining routines and finding small ways to take control in your daily life can all help you to navigate the challenges of uncertainty.



You can find the latest COVID-19 news, updates and advice from the Australian Government [here](#).

**Head to Health** provides a wide range of digital mental health resources from trusted service providers, including resources and services for people affected by the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and bushfires.