

Supporting children and young people to cope with the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic



If you are concerned your child has COVID-19 please call the dedicated hotline on 1800 675 398 or visit <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus> (<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>) for more information.

Many parents are looking for advice about how to best support their children to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. With the situation rapidly changing, frequent news of people becoming unwell, and many children unable to continue with their normal activities, it is a very unsettling time for families. This fact sheet contains some information for parents and carers to help them support their children and answer their questions during this challenging and uncertain time.

Talk about coronavirus with your children

It's important not to avoid talking about coronavirus with your children - avoiding the topic may make them feel more worried and unsure about what's going on. Many children will already have thoughts and ideas about coronavirus, so start by asking them what they know. Use open-ended questions and address any worries, fear or false information they may have heard. It's okay to tell kids that we don't have all the answers but when we know more we will share it with them.

Be open and honest, but age-appropriate

Stick to the facts, but think about your child's age when sharing information with them. Children of different ages will need different answers. Keep it simple and clear for young kids and provide more detailed information for older children and teenagers.

It's important to remind children that although they might catch the virus, it is unlikely to make them very unwell. Tell them that if they do get sick it will be similar to a cold that they may have experienced before. They may get a fever, cough, runny nose or sore throat and be sick for a few days or around a week, and they will get better. It's okay to tell children that adults are more likely to get sick, especially if they are elderly or have a medical condition. Let them know that most of the strategies they see in the community, like hand washing and social distancing, are actually to help protect the most vulnerable. By doing these things they are helping to protect others.

Stay positive and hopeful

It is helpful to stay positive and hopeful when discussing coronavirus with your children. Often the media focuses on worrying and negative aspects, so your children may become overwhelmed and think the situation is hopeless. Explain that there are lots of doctors and scientists working really hard to find out about this virus, and that they are learning new things every day. Let them know that many people around the world have recovered from coronavirus. It's important for them to know that although things are different at the moment, and may be hard for a while, things will eventually return to normal.

Limit information children get through the media

There is lots of information in the media about coronavirus and it is likely that your children are seeing and hearing this through the TV, radio and online. Try to limit how much your child watches, hears and reads in the news, including on social media. Seeing graphic images or reading about the increasing number of cases of coronavirus can become overwhelming and upsetting. It's especially important to try to limit your child's exposure to frightening material in the news or online.

Focus on the things children can control

We need to help children focus on what they can do to stay safe and healthy. By giving children practical things that they can do will help them to feel empowered rather than helpless. Remind children about hand hygiene – make sure they know how to wash their hands properly and remind them to do this before and after they eat, as well as after touching their face or blowing their nose. See our video on [keeping well](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpGAR-N8Zv8) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpGAR-N8Zv8>). Teach them how to cough or sneeze into their elbow.

Remind them to avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth. Where possible, crowds should be avoided and people should refrain from close physical contact with people outside of their household. Show kids how to greet each other hands-free such as by touching elbows or feet.

Keeping well through physical activity, a healthy diet and plenty of sleep are also really important ways to support your children. Lots of children are disappointed that their regular sport and other activities may be cancelled. Find other ways to keep your kids active, such as spending time in the backyard or going for a family walk, run or bike ride.

Stick to routines where possible

Children need routine more than ever during uncertain and unpredictable times. Maintain as much normality in the house and daily life as you can and include family time. You can structure your child's routine around meal time and bedtimes, as well as online learning activities for older children. Try to factor some physical activity into the day, as this is important for children of all ages, and good for adults too.

Show your children that you are calm

Children look to their parents and carers as a guide about how to react to situations. Even very young children are sensitive to stress and anxiety in adults. Parents and carers need to manage their own emotions and anxiety to help keep kids calm. Try not to talk to children about coronavirus when you are feeling particularly stressed or overwhelmed. You can ask your partner or another trusted adult to speak with them.

Look out for signs of anxiety or stress in your children

Everyone reacts differently in stressful situations. Some children are naturally more anxious than others, and coronavirus may affect them a lot. Keep an eye out for highly anxious or unusual behaviour in your children. Younger children may show signs such as a change in behaviour, being more emotional, having temper tantrums or trouble sleeping or eating. Older children can show these signs too or they may also appear distracted, have trouble concentrating or become forgetful. Some children may develop repetitive or obsessive behaviours, such as excessive fear of germs or contamination.

Make sure you keep having conversations with your children about other things besides COVID-19. Take the time to sit with your child and listen to what they are worried about. If you are concerned that your child is showing signs of high levels of anxiety or stress, seek advice from your GP.

Look after yourself too

Uncertain and stressful times can put a lot of strain on family relationships. In order to best support children, it is important that parents look after themselves too during this very stressful and difficult time. Try to find time for adequate rest and self-care. If you are feeling particularly stressed, overwhelmed or unsafe, or that you are not able to support your children in the way that you would like, please reach out to family and friends or your GP.

Key points to remember

- Children look to adults as a guide about how to react in stressful situations
- Stay calm, positive and hopeful when talking with your child about coronavirus
- Keep information clear, honest and age-appropriate
- Limit media exposure about coronavirus
- Give children practical things to do, like good hand hygiene, to help them feel in control
- Make sure you and your child stay physically active
- If you or your child are feeling overwhelmed or stressed seek help from friends, family or your GP
- Try to make time to answer your child's questions and keep the communication channels open

For more information

- Kids Health Information: [Family violence \(https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Family_violence/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Family_violence/)
- Kids Health Information: [Hand washing \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Hand_Hygiene_why_is_it_so_important/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Hand_Hygiene_why_is_it_so_important/)
- The Royal Children's Hospital: [Coronavirus \(https://www.rch.org.au/rch/Coronavirus_\(COVID-19\)/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/rch/Coronavirus_(COVID-19)/)
- The Royal Children's Hospital: [Staying well \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpGAR-N8Zv8\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpGAR-N8Zv8)
- Department of Health and Human Services: [Coronavirus disease \(https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus\)](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus)
- Health Direct: [Coronavirus \(https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus\)](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus)

- Raising Children Network: [Coronavirus and children \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Centre: [COVID-19 outbreak \(https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf\)](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf)
- Ambulance Victoria: [Children and COVID-19 \(https://lsv.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Tip-Sheet-Children-and-COVID-19_V2.pdf\)](https://lsv.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Tip-Sheet-Children-and-COVID-19_V2.pdf)
- Zero to three: [Tips to make the most of video chats \(https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus\)](https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus)
- Zero to three: [Tips for families \(https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus\)](https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus)

Common questions our doctors are asked

My child is worried that their grandparent might get very sick or die from coronavirus. What should I tell them? It is important to be honest but hopeful and positive. Tell your child that by practising things like social isolation and hand hygiene can help to protect older relatives from catching the virus. Also tell them that we have excellent hospitals here in Australia, with lots of doctors and nurses ready to look after people if they become sick.

My child still wants to see their friends and has asked if we can have a play date. What should I do? Explain to your child that one way we can all help to stop the coronavirus from spreading by spending less time mixing with other people. Instead of a play date, think about other ways they can socially connect with their friends, such as through facetime, a phone call or writing a letter. Explain that things won't be this way forever, and things will return to normal eventually.

My child has heard about people dying in the news and is worried it is going to happen to them. What should I say?

Reassure your child that coronavirus does not make children very sick and they will not die from coronavirus. If they do catch it, they are likely to have cold, with similar symptoms to those they have experienced before, such as a sore throat, runny nose, cough and fever, and they would likely get better in a week or so.

Developed by The Royal Children's Hospital General Medicine, Psychology, Social Work and Mental Health departments. We acknowledge the input of RCH consumers and carers.

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