

## Talking to children about COVID-19 (Coronavirus)



(Adapted from *A Parent Resource*. National Association of School Psychologists, 2020.  
<https://www.nasponline.org/>)

### *Help children cope with anxiety by providing accurate information*

Children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events such as COVID-19. Parents, caregivers, whānau and teachers will have a particularly important part to play in reassuring children at this time.

Children will react to and follow your verbal and non-verbal cues. If you are able to stay informed and realistic, it will be easier for you to reassure children effectively as well.

Children need factual, age-appropriate information about COVID-19 so that they can also feel informed and in control. They need to know how they can play a part in avoiding infection and the spread of virus. They also need to feel that any fears that they may have can be talked about and addressed.

### **Reassure your children**

- If no one in your family has COVID-19 nor has had close contact with anyone with COVID-19, emphasise to your children that they and your family are fine.
- Remind them that the right people are working hard to keep New Zealanders safe, including the adults at the children's school or early learning service.
- Let your children talk about their feelings, and help reframe their concerns into the appropriate perspective.
- You know your children best. If they have a lot of questions, consider how much extra information would or wouldn't be helpful for them to know before replying.



Dr Michelle Dickinson (Nanogirl) has a great informational video for kids about COVID-19.

See it [here](#)

### Tips – if your child is anxious

- Try offering children simple choices to help give them a feeling of being in control. Would they like to use the red towel or the white towel to dry their hands? Spend some time together - would they like to do a puzzle or listen while you read a story? Make sure that you choose options that are both acceptable for you, so there is no chance of getting into a power struggle.
- Help them do some deep breathing exercises. (This works for adults too.) Gently hold their thumb with your hand, have them breathe slowly in and out, and count out loud, "1". Move your hand to hold their pointer finger, have them breathe slowly in and out, and count "2". Move to your hand to hold their middle finger, have them breathe slowly in and out, and count "3", and so on. You can move across just one hand and count to "5", or both hands to count to "10". Can they do it for you? Can they learn to do it for themselves –

many children are now practicing mindfulness exercises at school? Can they lie on the floor with their hand on their tummy and feel their breathe move in and out? You can ask your child if there are any other strategies that they know and use.

- Sparklers has a range of calming activities you could try <https://sparklers.org.nz/>

### **Make yourself available**

- Children may need extra attention from you, and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions. Make time for them.
- Tell them you love them, and give them plenty of affection.

Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or work. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions. Often they will ask the same questions again and again as they try to make sense of things – keep your answers simple, truthful and age appropriate. Children will be reassured by your consistent responses.

When sharing information, provide facts calmly, remind children that adults are working to address this concern, and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

### **Maintain a normal routine**

- Keep to a regular, predictable schedule to help show your child that their daily routines are in control and will continue as normal.
- Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

### **Avoid blaming others**

- Explain that sometimes people blame others for events they cannot control, but that this is not correct behaviour.
- Avoid stereotyping any one group of people as responsible for the virus.
- Report any bullying or negative comments you are aware of at your children's school or early learning service.
- Be aware of the influence that other adults with different attitudes on COVID-19 have on your children. You may have to explain to them that some people have different values from the ones that you and your children will follow.

### **Monitor social media and TV**

- Limit your children's television viewing, Internet access and social media involvement. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your children are present.
- Let your child know that a lot of COVID-19 information on the Internet may be based on rumours and inaccurate information.

## **Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices**

- Talk about what you and your children what they can do to help prevent infection.
- Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds each time (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds) and dry hands thoroughly.
- Cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough, and throw away the tissue immediately; or have them sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow.
- Do not share food or drinks.
- Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
- Discourage the child from touching their eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly to develop a strong immune system for fighting off illness.
- Discuss the new rules or practices at the child's school or early learning service.
- Keep in contact with your child's school or service and let them know if there have been any changes within your family.

## **What to emphasize when talking to children about school**

- Adults at school are taking care of your health and safety.
- Not many people have the COVID-19, and most of those who do will not get very unwell.
- Teachers are being especially careful to make sure that as few people as possible get sick.
- Children and students need to treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- There are things you can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading the disease, including covering your cough or sneezing into your elbow or a tissue, then throwing the tissue in the trash.
- Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds) and dry them thoroughly.