

COVID 19: Guidance on supporting children's mental health and wellbeing from the Government

What you need to know

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having an impact on everybody's lives. Regardless of their age, this will be a challenging time for many children and young people. How a child or young person responds to their individual situation will vary. Some may react immediately, some not at all, while others may show signs of difficulty later on. It is important to recognise that in most cases, these are normal responses to an abnormal situation.

How a child or young person responds to their individual situation may vary in different ways according to their individual characteristics and circumstances. For example, their age, physical or mental health condition, how they deal with stress, previous experiences or pre-existing mental or physical health condition.

During this time, it's important that you support and take care of the mental health of children or young people in your care, as well as your own mental health. There are lots of things you can do, and additional support is available if you need it.

Background

This advice is to help adults with caring responsibilities look after and support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, including those with additional needs and disabilities, during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[footnote 1\]](#)

There is more information on [how to stop the spread of coronavirus](#) available.

Looking after your own mental health

As well as thinking about the children or young people in your care, it is important to [take care of your own mental health and wellbeing](#). This will help you support yourself and those you care about. Children and young people react, in part, to what they see from the adults around them. When parents and carers deal with a situation calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for children and young people.

Promoting mental wellbeing and helping children and young people cope during the pandemic

Children and young people want to feel assured that their parents and carers can keep them safe. It will not always be possible to provide answers to all the questions that children and young people may ask, or to address all their concerns, so focus on listening and acknowledging their feelings to help them feel supported.

There are some actions you can consider to support a child's or young person's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic, including:

Look for changes

Children and young people may respond to stress in different ways. Signs may be emotional (for example, they may be upset, distressed, anxious, angry or agitated), behavioural (for example, they may become more clingy, or more withdrawn, or have difficulty concentrating, or they may wet the bed), or physical (for example, they may experience stomach or headaches). Look out for any changes in their behaviour and be aware that these changes may not occur in all contexts (for example they might just happen at school or at home).

Making time to listen

Create a calm safe space where they can communicate how they are feeling without judgement. Some young people may find it easier to talk while you are doing something together, such as playing or exercising in the park, going for a walk, painting or other activities. You can't always know the answer and it is often better to be honest and say 'I don't know' rather than put more pressure on yourself or set unrealistic expectations. Listen to them and acknowledge their concerns.

Remember to let them know you are there to help and give them extra love and attention if they need it. Children and young people who struggle to communicate how they feel may rely on you to interpret their feelings. For further advice you may contact [Young Minds Parents Helpline](#). They also offer Parents Email and Parents Webchat services.

[MindEd for families](#) is a free online educational resource about children and young people's mental health designed for all adults, which can support parents and carers through these exceptional

circumstances. Young Minds also has a useful resource about [‘Starting a conversation with your child’](#).

Providing clear information about the situation

One of the best ways to achieve this is by talking openly about what is happening and providing honest answers to any questions children have, using words and explanations that they can understand. Explain what is being done to keep them and their loved ones safe, including any actions they can take to help, such as washing their hands regularly.

There are resources available to help you do this, including the Children’s Commissioner’s [Children’s Guide to Coronavirus](#), or the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have produced a [storybook developed by and for children around the world affected by COVID-19](#).

Make sure you use reliable sources of information such as [GOV.UK](#) or the [NHS website](#) – incorrect or misleading information can create stress for the child or young person you care for.

Being aware of your own reactions

Children and young people often take their emotional cues from the important and trusted adults in their lives. How you respond to the situation is very important. Try to manage your own emotions and remain calm, speak kindly to them, and answer any questions they have honestly.

Support safe ways for children and young people to connect with their friends

Where it isn’t possible for them to meet in person, they can connect online or via phone or video calls. Advice for parents and carers on helping children to [stay safe online during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) is available.

Creating a new routine

Changes to our lives caused by the pandemic might impact on routines. Routine gives children and young people an increased feeling of safety in the context of uncertainty, so if your routine has changed, think about how to develop some regularity where possible. Some ideas might include:

- make a plan for the day or week that includes time for learning, free time (including play, creativity or hobbies) and relaxing. A weekly timetable that can be visualised can be helpful
- if children have to stay home from school, ask teachers what you can do to support continued learning at home. The Department for Education has a list of recommended [online educational resources](#) for those who are learning at home
- add in positive activities that you know the child or young person will enjoy- and discover new ideas for activities to do from home if needed. Encourage maintaining a balance between being online and offline. The [Children’s Commissioner guide](#) contains some ideas to help fight boredom
- children and young people ideally need to be active for 60 minutes a day, which can be more difficult when spending longer periods of time indoors. Plan time outside if you can do so safely or visit [Change4Life](#) for ideas for indoor games and activities. Physical activity is good for our physical and mental health
- good sleep is important for mental and physical health, so try to keep to existing bedtime and morning routines. The NHS provides [healthy sleep tips for children](#)
- try giving children and young people healthier alternatives to treats such as sweets or chocolate. See [Change4Life](#) for ideas

Limiting exposure to media and talking more about what they have seen and heard

Like adults, children and young people may become more distressed if they see repeated coverage about the COVID-19 pandemic in the media. Removing their access to the news is also rarely helpful as they are likely to find information from other sources, such as online or through friends. Try to avoid turning the television off or closing web pages when children or young people come into the room. This could make them assume that you are hiding important things from them or could cause them to worry. Instead, consider limiting the amount of exposure children and young people have to media coverage. The British Psychological Society have produced some helpful advice for parents about

[managing uncertainty.](#)

Young people will also hear things from friends and get information from social media. Talk to them about what is happening and ask them what they have heard. Try to answer their questions honestly but reassure where you can.

How children and young people of different ages may react

All children and young people are different, but there are some common ways in which different age groups may react to a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. The common reactions to distress will fade over time for most children and young people, though could return if they see or hear reminders of what happened. Understanding these may help you to support your family.

Working together to keep our children safe and happy

Halina Rooney

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