



How to talk the children about COVID-19 without making them anxious

Firstly, what qualifies us to give you this advice?

We are a group of Clinical Psychologists. This means we are trained to Doctoral level in Clinical Psychology and are professionally registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. We have years of experience in child and adolescent mental health services and have seen lots of children presenting with anxiety.

Should we talk to children about COVID-19?

Yes. Given the anxiety everyone is feeling about COVID-19, we have been asked whether children should be protected from this and not told about COVID-19 but it is important that we do talk to children about this for a number of reasons:

Firstly, to keep them safe. We need to talk to children in order to tell them how to protect themselves from COVID-19 by using the public health advice.

Secondly, children may be hearing about coronavirus anyway from a variety of sources even if it is just overhearing conversations. If they pick up pieces of information but don't have a full understanding, they can put these pieces of information together and come to a misunderstanding which might make them anxious.

Thirdly, there is evidence that children pick up on people not being truthful with them and pick up on the anxieties of adults around them, particularly those they are close to. If they are picking up anxiety, given the understandable population level anxiety at present, without having an understanding of why this anxiety is around at the moment, they can become anxious.

How to start the conversation

If possible, start by asking if your child has heard about coronavirus. If they say “no”, then this is your opportunity to talk to them about it and give the most up to date information from official sources so that you know they have the best understanding they can have. If they have heard about coronavirus, you can ask what they know about it and where they heard about it. This allows you to correct any misunderstandings they may have or any misinformation they may have picked up on.

Be truthful

It’s important to be truthful with children as there is evidence that they pick up on people not being truthful with them. Allow them to ask questions but remember that you don’t have to have all the answers. Nobody has all the answers about coronavirus at the moment and while you may feel that children look to you for the answers and there is therefore a pressure on you to have the answers, it is ok that you don’t.

The main thing is to be truthful about this and to say something like “I don’t know the answer to that right now but I will try to find out” or “...let’s try to find out together”. This allows you to model to the child that it is ok not to have all the answers, that you are a team and you can look for answers you don’t already have together and is an opportunity for you to talk to them about the importance of looking at official sources of information.

Discussing practicalities

Please follow the public health advice on what the practicalities are. This guide is only about how to communicate these things to children and is in no way meant to replace public health advice. Also, be aware that public health advice may change over time so please keep an eye on this.

At time of writing, there is public health advice about handwashing and covering coughs/sneezes. Around telling children about this, it is important to talk to children but also to demonstrate these things to children. Talking will mean they remember the information in the part of their brain that deals with words, demonstrating will mean they remember it in different parts of their memory system and the combination of both may make it easier to remember. Some brains like words, others like pictures so giving both will hopefully mean most people are covered.

Demonstrating for children also means you can show them and then get them to show you. This allows you to check they were paying attention, they have remembered what to do and there are no misunderstandings. Around handwashing, many people are using a song to make sure children wash their hands for long enough. Some are using the Happy Birthday

song sung through twice. This is just because lots of children know that song but you can choose to use another method if you prefer as long as the child learns to wash their hands for long enough. Around covering coughs and sneezes, it may sound like a funny thing to do to demonstrate this but it is important for the reasons given already.

It is important to talk to children about the symptoms of coronavirus. This allows you to talk about the importance of letting you know if they feel unwell. Alongside this, speaking about the symptoms means you can reassure your child if they are feeling unwell with symptoms that are not like those of coronavirus. Sometimes we feel different things in our bodies and we can misinterpret these as symptoms. For example, when we are anxious we often feel a feeling of butterflies in our tummy. If children feel this, they can misinterpret it as symptoms of illness, particularly if you have just talked to them about a health issue like coronavirus. If you have told them about the symptoms of coronavirus and they come to you with a sore tummy, then you can remind them that this was not one of the symptoms of coronavirus and agree to resolve the sore tummy as a separate issue.

Discussing emotions around COVID-19

Children will be at different ages and stages and therefore have different levels of understanding of emotions. They may only be able to label emotions; or they may be able to talk about how some emotions feel; or what happens in their bodies when they feel different emotions; or how they know when others feel different emotions, such as by looking at facial expressions. It can be helpful for you to bring up the issue of emotions around COVID-19 with your child so that they know that it is ok to feel things about this and to talk to you about how they feel.

In general, people are understandably anxious about coronavirus but this may be a difficult concept for a child. They are likely to use other language and that's fine. Go with the language they use. This is how to make things understandable and child-friendly. You can talk about how you feel and give a message that it's ok to feel different things at this time but it is also important to talk to your child about what to do when they feel different emotions. You can put across the idea that you are a team and it is important to talk about how you feel together and to think of things to make you all feel better.

Sources of help for children

It is helpful for your child to be aware of where to find help should they need it. You should talk about this in relation to each of the environments they are likely to be in.

One of the main sources of help for your child is you. This means it is really important to look after yourself at this time. Partly this is so that you can best look after your child. The other part of this is that if you look after yourself then you are modelling to your child that self care is important. Often adults who look after children put themselves and their needs last but

think about what message this gives your child. Imagine them in the future; you would want them to look after themselves so you need to do this too.

How to end the conversation

Children will pick up from you whether this is a topic that you are now finished discussing and never expect to return to or whether this is something they can talk to you about again. Make sure children know this is something they can come back to you to speak about again. Talk about yourselves as a team explaining that you can talk about anything and that you will always help them. This will reassure them now about coronavirus but also about talking about other things in the future.

What if they don't like to talk?

Draw pictures, paint, role play with teddies/ dolls/ figures, put on a show together. There are lots of ways to communicate the information with children so go with your child's preferred method of communication. If you role play or put on a show together, there are added benefits of fun time together as well as being able to check they have understood the information about coronavirus appropriately.

General advice for talking to children

There is no magic wand or magic fairy dust. There is no "right" way to have a conversation or perfect thing to say to make everything child-friendly. Listening is key and the main thing is to keep trying. If you try to talk to your child about coronavirus and they are distracted by other things then try again another time. Remember you don't have to have all the answers and fix everything. You are teaching them resilience skills to know that even without all the answers and without being able to fix everything all of the time, we can be strong together and manage really difficult things.

What if you think your child is becoming anxious?

Remember that anxiety is a natural reaction and it's normal during a pandemic to feel anxious. Most people are feeling anxious at the moment so it's not surprising if children feel it too.

We are happy to support you if you are worried about your child's anxiety or that of yourself or someone else.