



Parenting during pandemic

Day 19: Children's understanding of illness and how to support them with this.

Health perceptions and health beliefs are known to change over the lifespan. This is partly due to us being more likely to experience illness as we get older. Many children have very limited experience of being ill and so their understanding of illness and therefore the aspects of their health perceptions and health beliefs that are based on their experiences are limited. The consequence of this is that while adults may think of illness as the presence of disease or illness and health as lack of these things; children often think of other aspects of health such as health related behaviours like engagement in sports or psychological consequences of positive health, such as feeling happy.

Another important aspect of children's understanding of illness is what they are told about it by significant people in their lives. Children's understanding of illness is very complex and based on lots of factors. Added to this is the fact that children's understanding is a moving target in that they are developing all of the time and their cognitive ability to understand is therefore different over time. It is important to know, however, that children can misunderstand illness attributing it to something they have done wrong or a punishment for something. Some of the international charities have highlighted the risk of setting up biases during the pandemic around attributing COVID-19 or the spread to particular people or groups of people. Children also may not understand treatments and think of them as useless and a waste of time, therefore not feeling motivated to follow treatment advice.

There is evidence that it is easier to establish positive attitudes about health than it is to change negative ones so giving children positive messages about looking after their health early on can be helpful. This is often why schools have programmes supporting health and wellbeing of children from the very beginning of their education.

With regard to [how to talk to children about COVID-19](#), we have a guide on our website as well as [a guide to talking to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder about COVID-19](#). We focused in those guides on trying to talk to children about COVID-19 without making them feel anxious. This blog, however, highlights the wider effects of making sure our

conversations with children are helpful both now and in the sense of the longer term beliefs they may set up.

The pandemic may impact children's understanding of illness in many ways, for example they may be experiencing illness now and/or experiencing what it is like when others at home are ill or loved ones further away are ill. They may be hearing more talk about illness now and about protecting themselves and others. They may be feeling all sorts of things about lockdown and social distancing. They are likely at this time to be looking to the adults in their lives to help them understand and process what is going on. What we say is particularly important now ([see our guides for support on this](#)). Children also learn a lot from what the adults in their lives do. This is called modelling. So it is helpful for their understanding and processing of the current situation if they see you consistently following the official advice around the pandemic and how to keep everyone safe.

We hope these tips are helpful. Well done on managing another day off school and we hope you will join us again tomorrow.

Tomorrow's topic: How to talk to children about death during the pandemic

Please [contact us with questions, comments or topics](#) you'd like to see covered. We'd love to hear your feedback.

Wishing you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.