

Fact sheet

Talking with children about COVID-19

Purpose and background

Given the disruptions to ordinary life caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and media coverage of the pandemic, it is understandable that some children and adults may feel overwhelmed and stressed during this time.

As children might find it difficult to understand what they are seeing and hearing in the media or hearing from the people around them, they can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety, stress and sadness. Even babies can pick up, and be affected by, the stress of those around them.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms can include fever, cough, a sore throat, and shortness of breath. The virus can spread from person to person, but good hygiene, cleaning and physical distancing can help to prevent infection.

Talking with children

Children depend on the adults around them for safety and security and will need reassurance, care and opportunities to share their feelings. By speaking directly with children about challenging circumstances, you can help them to cope, be prepared and make sense of what they are seeing, hearing and feeling.

Many educators may be unsure about how to talk with children about COVID-19, including how and when to start a conversation and what information to share. The following are some tips adapted from UNICEF Australia (see below for link):

Starting the conversation

Start by finding out how much the child already knows and follow their lead. If they are particularly young and haven't already heard about the outbreak, you may not need to raise the issue – just take the opportunity to remind them of good hygiene practices, without introducing new fears.

The following questions may help when starting a conversation:

- 'There are lots of people talking about Coronavirus. Do you know what that is?'
- 'You've probably heard people talking about physical distancing. What do you think that means?'
- 'You might have noticed that mum/dad/carer is working at home now. Do you know why that is?'
- 'We can't go to swimming lessons at the moment. Do you know why?'

Find the right time to talk about it, making sure the child feels comfortable and you are both relaxed. Allow children to talk freely. Drawing, stories and other activities may help to open up a discussion.

Most importantly, don't minimise or avoid their concerns. Be sure to acknowledge their feelings and assure them that it's natural to feel scared about these things. Demonstrate that you're listening by giving them your full attention and make sure they understand that they can talk to you and other educators whenever they like.

Be honest with your answers

Children have a right to truthful information about what's going on in the world, but adults also have a responsibility to keep them safe from distress. Use age-appropriate language, watch their reactions and be sensitive to their level of anxiety.

If you can't answer their questions, don't guess. Use it as an opportunity to explore the answers together.

Coping with stress

When we're seeing and hearing lots of troubling images on TV, radio or online, it can sometimes feel like the crisis is all around us. Children may not distinguish between images on screen and their own personal reality and may believe they're in imminent danger.

You can help children cope with the stress by making opportunities for them to play and relax, when possible. Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible, especially before they go to sleep.

Sharing resources

If services wish to share resources about COVID-19 with their children and families, it is again important to consider what information is appropriate to share with children. This will require you to consider the abilities, interests and wellbeing of each child and the views of families. Please think about the following when choosing what to share:

- Whether all information in the resource is recent and relevant. If it is not, think about how it can be adjusted or what parts may be useful.
- The source of information, ensuring that any information used for children is from reputable and reliable outlets.
- Ensure that educators have viewed the resource to assess its appropriateness for each child's individual needs prior to sharing with children. There will be a variety of ages and abilities among children in early childhood education and care and school age care, so educators should reflect on the suitability of information for different age groups.
- Educators can reflect with older children on how much information is suitable. The child's ability to emotionally regulate may provide a useful cue for the point at which the topic should be changed.

Further support and information

If you would like further supporting materials on COVID-19, the links below may be a starting point for discussing COVID-19 with children, families and educators:

- UNICEF Australia – [How to talk to your children about coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- Beyond Blue – [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Supporting educators, children and young people](#)
- Beyond Blue – [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Supporting early learning communities](#)
- *The Conversation* has released [a podcast for children explaining COVID-19](#)
- *The Spoke*, Early Childhood Australia's Blog - [Viral talk with children](#)
- raisingchildren.net.au - The Australian Parenting website - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): talking about physical distancing and self-isolation](#)
- Australian Red Cross – [Talking to children and young people about COVID-19](#)