

Mental health and the coronavirus research bite #3:

Talking to children and young people about the pandemic

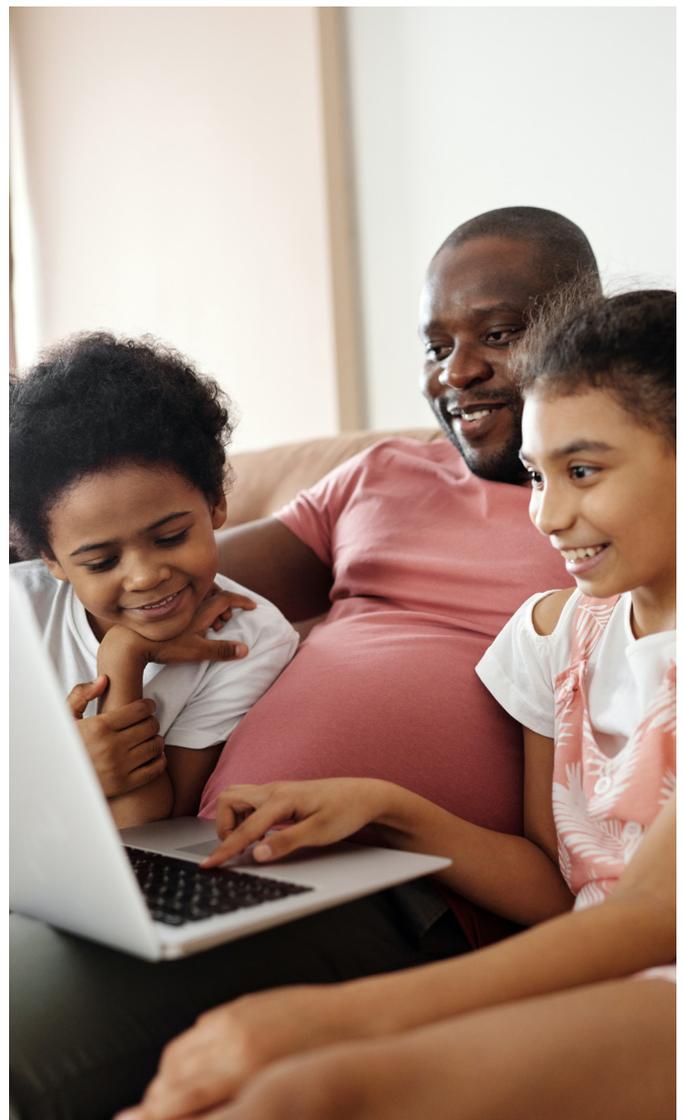
About this series

We are aware that parents, carers and those working with young people might have many questions about how to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. We know that it can be hard to find evidence about the best ways to tackle some of these challenges. The Evidence Based Practice Unit (a collaboration between the Anna Freud Centre and UCL) is producing a series of 'research bites' based on very rapid reviews of existing research. These are not thorough or extensive reviews, rather they aim to offer concise and timely insights on some topical issues.

The question: how can parents, carers and professionals talk to children and young people about the pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic is a rapidly developing situation, and both adults and children and young people are being exposed to vast amounts of new and changing information from many sources. Alongside this, children and young people are experiencing substantial changes in their daily routines which some may find confusing, worrying or scary. During this time, adults may understandably want to protect children from distress, and might avoid talking about the implications of the coronavirus or the difficult feelings that some people may be experiencing in relation to the coronavirus.

This research bite looks at how we can have conversations with children and young people about the coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our lives. Although the current context is unprecedented, past research can help us to understand how providing information and communicating with children and young people during difficult situations could be an important aspect of community-led responses to the pandemic.



How did we answer this question?

We conducted a very rapid review of the research literature, looking for published research relating to talking to children and young people about pandemics, epidemics or disasters. Conducting a literature search in this way is less rigorous than a systematic reviewⁱ but helps us find relevant evidence quickly.

When conducting our searches, we discovered that some reviews of communicating with children and young people about the coronavirus had already been published. A number of these reviews draw on lessons learned from communicating with children and young people about serious or terminal illness, therefore further rapid searches were conducted to include this literature. From the research identified, we have summarised some of the key evidence-based ways of communicating with and sharing information with children and young people about the coronavirus.

What did we find out?

Parents, carers and professionals may be concerned that conversations about the coronavirus will cause worry and anxiety among children and young people. The evidence reviewed as part of this research bite suggests several recommendations for talking to children and young people about situations like the coronavirus in ways that can help them to feel informed and supported, while limiting worry and anxiety:

- » Children need honest information: without honest information children may attempt to make sense of an unsettling situation on their own, and sometimes their imagination can be more frightening than the truth. Try not to share information that you can't be sure is reliable and accurate - there are many questions you may not have the answer to but be honest about these uncertainties and acknowledge that people are trying to find answers to their questions.^{1,2,3}
- » Consideration of the child's developmental stage is key to ensuring that the communication with them is effective. It's important not to overestimate or

underestimate the child's understanding. Listening to what the child currently understands or believes about the coronavirus can help adults judge how to present the information they want to convey.^{2,3,4}

- » Children aged 3-6 can have difficulty separating fact from fiction; therefore short and simple explanations using pictures or models, or showing examples (e.g. of face masks or washing hands) can help in this respect. Children aged 7-12 will be more aware of the changes in their daily routine. It is important to encourage them to express their feelings and understanding. Adolescents may find more detailed information helpful, with full and honest answers to any questions they have. Adolescents may want to take more of a lead in conversations about the coronavirus.^{4,5}
- » All children are different. Be sensitive to and aware of the individual child's level of curiosity, maturity and the emotions they are currently experiencing. Doing so can help to protect children from receiving too much or too little information. For example, a child who is feeling cheerful and behaving in a playful way may be overwhelmed by a serious sit-down talk. Asking children how much they want to know will help with effective communication.^{2,4}
- » Research has shown that adults sometimes use technical or factual language to try and minimise children's distress, but it is important to have emotion-focussed conversations too, to enable children to share their concerns. As well as sharing facts or practical information about the situation, talk about the child's feelings and concerns, perhaps even sharing your own feelings, if appropriate. This can help adults to normalise the child or young person's emotional reactions.^{1,6}
- » Try to protect children and young people from messages that promote fear or alarm, on the television, radio or social media for instance, as these can be especially frightening if they are misunderstood.³ Encourage them to seek information from trusted and accessible sources.ⁱⁱ

i A systematic review summarises evidence about a topic by looking at the results of multiple studies.

ii For example BBC Newsround:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>



What are the implications?

The coronavirus has meant that children have been affected by school closures and social distancing. Some may have experienced illness or may be worried about a friend or family member who is unwell. With many uncertainties and a constantly changing situation, there is a risk of avoidance of communication or ineffective communication with children and young people about the pandemic.

The research reviewed indicates the importance of listening to what children and young people currently understand and feel about the coronavirus, to help adults decide how detailed the information they provide should be, and the most appropriate ways of conveying it. The research also suggests that providing an open, honest and safe space for children and young people to talk about the coronavirus with the adults they trust could be vital.

Take-away message

Each child and young person may feel and react differently to the coronavirus and its impact on their life. Listening to their current understanding and being sensitive to their feelings and emotional state is key in approaching conversations about the pandemic in ways that will help them feel informed and supported.

Relevant resources

- » The Anna Freud Centre: Reassuring children and young people who are worried about coronavirus: advice for parents and carers: <https://www.annafreud.org/media/11245/option-3-covid-advice-parents.pdf>
- » UNICEF: How to talk to your child about coronavirus: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>
- » NSPCC: Talking to a child worried about coronavirus (COVID-19): <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/depression-anxiety-mental-health/>
- » Mental Health Foundation: Talking to your children about the coronavirus pandemic: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/talking-to-children>
- » BBC Newsround: The BBC's news website targeted at children and young people: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>

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About EBPU

The Evidence Based Practice Unit is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud Centre. Founded in 2006, this collaboration bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health. We conduct research, develop tools, provide training, evaluate interventions and disseminate evidence across four themes:

Risk | Resilience | Change | Choice

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