

Supporting our clients during **COVID-19**

Supporting children during the COVID-19 pandemic

Information about COVID-19 is rapidly evolving as new details are confirmed and new information emerges. As parents, our first concern is about how to protect and take care of our children. Knowing how to support our kids can reduce stress and help in creating some sense of control over the situation.



It is important to use reliable sources of information as there is an array of misinformation in social media, the news, and Internet. We must understand the symptoms of COVID-19, in the event that children become unwell.

What is Coronavirus (COVID-19)?

The following information is referenced from Australian Government websites and updated daily.

As you may be aware, Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms may include the following:

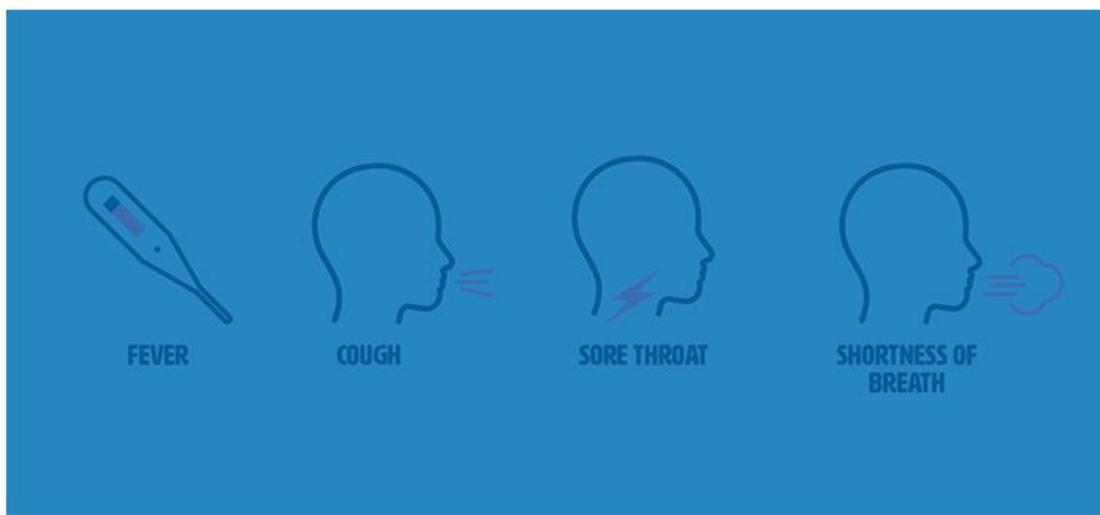
- fever
- flu-like symptoms such as cough, sore throat, and fatigue
- shortness of breath

Symptoms can range from mild illness to pneumonia. Some people recover easily, others may get very sick, very quickly. There is now evidence that it spreads from person to person.

State and federal government health departments provide factual sources of information:

<https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov#what-is-coronavirus-covid19>

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/alerts/Pages/coronavirus-faqs.aspx>



For further information on symptoms visit:

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-identifying-the-symptoms.pdf>

The impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on children

Children will respond and react to the Covid-19 pandemic in different ways. A child's reaction will greatly depend on their developmental stage and previous exposure to stressful situations. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that children and young people should understand basic, age-appropriate information about the coronavirus, including its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to

prevent transmission. Interrelate has developed some tips to help clients support their children.



Tips for supporting children

Be factual and explain COVID-19 in a child-friendly way

Children might find it difficult to understand what they are hearing or seeing online or on TV. They are also hearing – and overhearing - things from other people and could feel anxiety, stress, and sadness.

We need to role model behaviour to our children by remaining calm and reassuring. It is important to have adult conversations about COVID-19 away from children as they will react to our verbal and non-verbal cues. It is amazing what children absorb and take in, even when we think they aren't paying attention. It is important to provide comfort and reassurance so that they feel safe; this will help to reduce children's stress and anxiety.

Children also need an avenue to express their feelings and help to reframe their concerns and perspectives. Children will have questions and it is important that we listen and make ourselves available. It is important to have an open conversation with your child to help them understand the COVID-19 pandemic. Children have a right to

truthful information, however, we also need to keep them safe and reduce stress and anxiety levels.

Some ideas to help conversations include:

- Start by inviting your child to talk about the issue. Find out how much they already know and follow their lead.
- Use drawings, stories, and other activities to help to open a discussion. Demonstrate that you're listening by giving your child your full attention.
- Use age-appropriate language.
- Don't overwhelm them with too much information. Encourage them to express and communicate their feelings.
- Discuss the different reactions they may experience and explain that these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Monitor their reactions and be sensitive to increasing levels of anxiety.
- Explain that some online information is not accurate and even media reports can be misleading.
- Share with them some of the social media pages showing the positive ways that people around the world are responding to their situation.
- Use creative fun activities to engage with your children. So many enjoyable events and activities have been put on hold both in the community and at school resulting in many disappointments, so try to bring as much fun into the home as you can.
- Try to be future focused in your conversations. Children are very focused on the present and they might perceive that the current situation will last forever. Try to remind them that this is a temporary situation as often as you can.

Role model good hygiene for young children

To reduce potential exposure or transmission of COVID-19, we all need to observe good hygiene practices. Some tips for achieving good hygiene are:

- Encourage good handwashing and explain why soap is needed to wash hands for at least 20 seconds.
- For younger children, sing songs such 'Twinkle Little Star' twice to encourage longer handwashing or sing along to songs they relate to from their favourites, such as the Wiggles. Make the exercise of good handwashing fun.
- Encourage the use of hand sanitiser.
- Explain to children why they shouldn't share cups, utensils, food, and drinks.
- Explain why children need to sit further apart from each other. This is not easy for young children. Have them practice stretching their arms out to show they could

not be able to touch their friends. Or they could imagine a hula hoop around them as their personal space bubble.

- Show children how to sneeze into their elbow or cover their mouth with an arm when coughing.
- Explain that if they start to feel hot or develop a cough they need to let an adult know.

Limit exposure to news

Television, the internet, and social media need to be monitored. Constantly watching news updates can cause more anxiety and fear. Information designed for adults can particularly create confusion in younger children, so limit their exposure to the news.

Some exposure is okay, however the news and social media can heighten anxiety. Instead of watching the news, you could organise a virtual playdate, depending upon the age, of the children. Think about doing some fun activities such as cooking as a family or playing a game in the backyard. You can catch up with the news later.

Offer support, hope, and reassurance

It is very distressing for children to see and hear about the impact of COVID-19 in terms of loss of human life and the possible effect on the Australian economy, including job losses. Children might have difficulty in separating what is happening in other countries from their own reality.

They need time to just be children and carefree without the worries of the world on their shoulders. Staying positive and optimistic and having the mindset that this is a temporary situation will help. We might have to change our lives such as cancelling fun events, holidays or activities, for now, but remind them that they can be rescheduled so they will enjoy these later on.

Keeping regular routines

Keep regular routines where possible. Routine helps children feel a sense of safety and security. If your child reads a book before bed, completes homework after school, or has playtime outside before dinner, try to make sure they continue to do these just as they would on a normal day.

Ensure they get up, have meals, and go to bed at their normal times. Consistency and structure are calming during times of stress. Children, especially younger ones or those who are anxious, benefit from knowing what's going to happen and when.

Role model respectful relationships

It is also important that we avoid blaming any one group for the virus. Racial discrimination and bullying can result. It is important to check that your child is not bullying or being bullied. Explain that coronavirus has nothing to do with what culture, background or language someone speaks. Everyone deserves to feel safe and be respected. As parents, we need to role model the importance of being kind to one another.

Connect with family

Keep in touch with grandparents and family members via phone or online. It is important to keep your distance at the moment to ensure everyone stays safe, but technology can help maintain some connection.

Children are fairly resilient, however, sometimes there can be signs that a child needs further support and assistance. If a child is showing signs of any of the following, it is important to seek further assessment and support from your school counsellor, General Practitioner, or a professional psychologist/counsellor.

Look after yourself

Self-care in this time is also important for parents/carers. It is an unusual time and it is essential that you also look after yourself. You will cope better if you have some time to self-care for yourself. How we manage our own anxiety has an impact on our kids. This time can be extremely stressful especially for young people in their senior high school years.

Refer to our tip sheet on enhancing children' and young people's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic