

Younger Children's Wellbeing during Covid-19- Dr Sinead Ahern- HSE Psychologist

This is an uncertain and scary time. Its normal for you and the people around you to feel anxious. This is especially true for young children.

The first thing to remember as a parent is to check in with yourself and your own anxiety. It will be very hard to have a useful conversation with our children if we feel overwhelmed ourselves. Lots of the tips below apply to parents too and practicing them as a family can be a great way of keeping mentally fit during this worrying time.

Listen and try to understand.

Take the time to ask your children questions about how they are feeling. Think about your child's language skills. When providing answers to your children consider using their language and the images they are comfortable with.

Acknowledge feelings

News of Covid-19 is everywhere and children will be aware that things are happening. If we hide information or dismiss their feelings they could feel confused or worry that something is being hidden from them.

Avoid '*don't be worrying/ don't be silly*' statements. It's ok to let children know that you are a little worried too. It can be a good opportunity to talk and to practice coping techniques together.

Resources to help your children understand

Some children may find it useful to look at children's news reports or fact-based websites. For example RTE's News2Day produces high quality, factual information designed for children.

If you search for 'Department of Education coronavirus' you'll see a guide by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) on children's well being during the crisis.

If you search for 'NPR goatsandsoda coronavirus' it will bring you to an informative comic strip for children

Unicef also has a short guide to talking to your children about the virus and you can find that by searching for 'unicef children coronavirus'.

When worry gets out of control-

If your child is worrying a lot it may be useful to reduce the amount of time they spend worrying by using 'worry time'.

Set aside 15 minutes when you can give your child your full attention, but not too close to bed time - our worries can feel a lot bigger then.

Use a timer or clock to show 'worry time' has begun. Listen to your child's worries with no interruptions. Consider using reputable, trusted news websites to explore how realistic the worry is e.g. 'I'm afraid everyone I love will die' – read reports about how many people recover quickly, find out about the types of things that are being done to keep people safe, in particular the great local voluntary effort in your community.

If you wanted to, you could use a notebook to write down worries and then feed them to a 'worry monster'. After worry time try to do something calming or fun as a distraction. If your child comes to you with a worry outside of worry time acknowledge the feeling and jot it down for worry time.

Keep Healthy Routines

Routine is important for all of us and even more so for children and young people. With activities and school cancelled try to have a predictable routine to the day. Get up at the same time, get dressed and have activities planned. Use a whiteboard or a sheet of paper to jot down the day's activities. Getting exercise and fresh air (within 2 km of your house!) has been shown to have a really positive effect on mental health so make sure to schedule that into your routine.

Help your kids stay connected

Kids are missing seeing their grandparents, other relatives and of course their friends at this time. There are great communications technologies that allow you to have video chats with relatives and friends. It's also important for children to see and talk to their loved ones and pals to reassure them that the vast majority of people are doing well.

If you don't have access to a smartphone or laptop the traditional old phone call can go along way too!