



## Supporting Children in Care in understanding COVID-19

As we know, Coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing a lot of anxiety for people around the world. For the children you care for or work with, there may be added complexities to think about when supporting them through this unsettling time. This handout aims to help you to think about what your child might be experiencing, and how you can help them to manage. There are also a large number of resources available online specifically for children, which explain COVID-19 in child-friendly language. We have created a list of some of these at the end of this handout. If you choose to use these resources, we would advise that you go through them with your child in the first instance, so that you can answer any questions they have and provide emotional support to them.

Please use this handout alongside up to date information about COVID-19 from the NHS and Government websites ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk); [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

### Understanding your child's reaction to COVID-19

The majority of us will experience anxiety about COVID-19 at some point, and this is a completely understandable reaction. What we hear from official sources is only a miniscule amount of the information available; with news and social media outlets filled with commentary, advice, and opinions. Many of these are lacking in accuracy or biased towards negativity and scaremongering. This can present the COVID-19 virus in an overly frightening light, as well as emphasising the negatives in society, such as social isolation and panic-buying.

For Children in Care, their early experiences may have already left them with a skewed sense of themselves, others, and the world around them: what we often refer to as their 'internal working model'. It is valuable to think about how this may be impacted by events such as the COVID-19 outbreak:

- **Sense of self:** Due to their early experiences, the child may view themselves as vulnerable and unsafe. This is a view likely to be exacerbated at the current time; fearing they too may become one of the individuals to die of the virus. A child may become preoccupied with safety and hygiene, and fearful of having contact with others. Conversely, they may feel so helpless that they begin to engage in destructive behaviours to themselves and others.

- **Sense of others:** The child may expect that others will abandon or leave them; a fear likely to be made worse hearing about illness and death in the news. In addition, seeing the self-interested behaviour emphasised in the media (e.g. panic-buying), may exacerbate their sense of others being selfish and unreliable, and therefore them needing to care for themselves.
- **Sense of the world:** Early experiences may mean the child may already view their world as unsafe, unpredictable and dangerous, which would be exacerbated by the current worldwide anxiety, death, and day-to-day unpredictability.

Generally, we know that children tend to find it harder than adults to express how they are feeling, including when they feel anxious about something. This is particularly the case for children who have not experienced attuned and responsive care, as they have not had the opportunity to learn about their emotions, how to express them, or even that it is okay to do so. As such, during this period of heightened anxiety, your child's anxiety may come out in other ways, such as angry outbursts or disruptive behaviour, or they may become more withdrawn to cope with their overwhelming feelings. Being tuned into this and seeing beneath the behaviour on the surface is key: your child is not trying to be difficult or disruptive, but is coping in the only way they know how.

## **How can I help?**

### **1. Listen with PACE**

Take time to listen to your child and support them to express themselves – what is it that they are worried about? This might be quite different from what you are expecting, so it is important to understand what is going on for them specifically before working out how you can support them. Our separate PACE leaflet offers general guidance about how to have therapeutic conversations with your child; however the general principles are:

- **Playfulness:** adopting a relaxed, light, and confident tone; more like storytelling than 'lecturing'. Being playful, relaxed, and 'light' can help keep things in perspective, and remind both parties of the strength of the relationship despite any struggles.
- **Acceptance:** You are aiming to convey your complete understanding and acceptance of the child's inner world. This inner life is not right or wrong; rather 'it is what it is', and you can communicate this to the child. As such, whilst a child may *behave* in an unacceptable way, you can show that you understand why the child may have done that given their inner thoughts and concerns.
- **Curiosity:** This involves you working together with the child to 'figure out' what might be going on for them, using a curious and 'wondering' approach. For example, you might take guesses about concerns the child may have, e.g. *"Perhaps you are worried I might get ill"*

*and won't be able to care for you anymore?"; "Maybe you are finding it difficult not knowing what will happen next?"*

- **Empathy:** Empathy comes from imagining what the child is likely to be experiencing given their historical experiences and the current context, and then demonstrating to the child that you know and can understand how difficult this is. For example: *"I can understand why you might feel like this, as I know you have had lots of adults leave you in the past"*. You can then convey your commitment to the child and your desire to support them through this.

## **2. Be open and honest**

In the face of high levels of anxiety and a bombardment of information, a child may make assumptions that are far worse than the reality; especially a child whose historical experiences have been negative or frightening. As such, providing a child with an appropriate understanding is very helpful.

What is appropriate to share with a child will obviously vary dependent on their level of understanding, and we do not want to frighten or overwhelm a child with detail they do not need to know. Nevertheless, the majority of children will have some level of comprehension that things are different at the moment, and it is important that the information they receive is accurate and balanced. Make sure that you are using up to date information, such as from the NHS and Government websites, and from resources such as those below. Your child may need new terms explaining to them, such as 'pandemic' or 'self-isolation'. If you don't know the answer to something, it is okay to say this; letting them know that you will try to find out.

Help your child to understand what they can be doing to protect themselves and others, such as washing their hands, and not coughing on others. You can be modelling this, and teaching your child ways of protecting themselves in a way that they can remember. There is a lot of advice about hygiene and self-care from other resources (see below). This will help your child to feel they have some semblance of control, in what feels like an out of control situation.

It is okay to share your feelings about the current situation with your child, and this may help to validate their feelings. However, be sure to do this at an appropriate level, such that it does not elevate the child's own anxiety, and reassure them that this is something manageable that you are able to help them with.

## **3. Try to remain calm and reassuring**

A child will take their lead about how anxious to be from what they observe from you. Do your best to try to remain calm, albeit acknowledging that this is a worrying time. Let the child know

that experts across the world are working together to keep people as safe and healthy as possible. Reassure your child that they are safe, and that you and others caring for them are focused on ensuring this.

#### **4. Protect your child and yourself from exposure to unhelpful information**

There is a huge amount of information available about COVID-19, some of which is unhelpful and anxiety-provoking. Constantly watching, reading, or listening to COVID-19 updates can increase anxiety. To ensure that your child and you get a break from this anxiety-provoking information, limit the time that you are exposing yourself to it; for example choosing to listen to the lunchtime news update only, or watching the news after your child has gone to bed.

Anxiety is likely to be increased if a child does not understand what they are hearing, so ensure that the information they are exposed to is age-appropriate and factual, such as the resources below. Talk to your child about how the information they see on social media may not be accurate or true.

It may also be helpful to share with your child positive stories from the media; for example how people are helping each other out during this time. This will help to dispel myths and their potential fears that there is no-one to protect them, and could help challenge their internal working model that may be making negative assumptions about others and the world.

#### **5. Try to maintain a routine**

All children benefit from some routine and predictability; however this is particularly the case for many Children in Care, whose previous experiences of uncertainty may have been negative or unsafe. Whilst your normal routines (e.g. attending school, social plans) may be disrupted during the current time, try to instil some consistency within your day to day lives. Consider using visual timetables to plan your day, including mealtimes and planned activities. Letting your child know what to expect from the day will help to reduce their anxiety about it. Having a structure and planned activities will also help to keep your child from becoming preoccupied with anxiety about COVID-19.

Try to incorporate time for nurture and connection with your child; for example, playing games together, pampering, massage, and bedtime stories. These things will help a child to feel safer and more able to rely on you. In addition, try to plan physical exercise, which we know is beneficial to emotional wellbeing and anxiety management. If your child is off school, trying to preserve time for some schoolwork is valuable; however do not push it if your child seems overwhelmed.

## 6. Look after yourself

This is likely to be an anxiety-provoking time for you, not just for your child. Ensure that you make time for yourself to do things that you know help your mental health: exercise, talk to trusted friends and family, or schedule in other things that you enjoy. You need to sustain your own resilience and mental health for you to be able to provide this for your child.

The MIND website has a section specifically discussing looking after your emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>.

### **Resources for children and young people**

*\*\*\*Please note that information and guidance for COVID-19 is constantly evolving. These resources were available and relevant at the time of writing; however please ensure you check their relevance and accuracy before sharing them with a child\*\*\**

The NHS and Government websites ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk); [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) contain the most up to date information and guidance about COVID-19. These websites are designed for adults; however will allow you to be confident that you understand the current situation as best as possible.

**BBC Newsround** (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>): This child-friendly news site includes up to date news bulletins, as well as guidance about how to manage worries, and practical issues such as hand-washing and self-isolation.

**MindHeart Covibook – A story about coronavirus** (<https://www.mindheart.co/descargables>): A very accessible story about COVID-19 and how to respond to it. The book includes activities to support a child in expressing what they might be feeling about the situation. It is also available in 18 languages.

**Mencap** (<https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/health/coronavirus>): Have produced an easy-read guide to COVID-19, including understanding the virus and preventing its spread. This could help with how you explain the virus and its management to your child.

**Carol Gray Social Stories** (<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>): Has produced a helpful guide to support children to understand pandemics and COVID-19, which uses simple language and visual supports. This may help you to explain the current situation to your child.

**The Autism Educator** (<https://theautismeducator.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Coronavirus-Free-Printable-Updated-2-The-Autism-Educator-.pdf>): Another excellent Social Story about COVID-19; helping children to understand some of the practical implications, including school closures.

**YoungMinds** (<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus/>):

This is most suited to teenagers; however contains guidance about managing anxiety related to COVID-19, and specific concerns e.g. about self-isolation. Ideally this should run alongside, rather than replace, the support and conversations you have with your young person.

**The British Psychological Society (BPS):**

(<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Talking%20to%20children%20about%20Coronavirus.pdf>): Offers additional guidance for talking to children about COVID-19.



**University Hospitals of  
Derby and Burton**  
NHS Foundation Trust

**Department of Clinical Psychology**



*Leaflet produced by Dr Jenny Taylor, Principal Clinical Psychologist, March 2020*