

# Supporting young children during COVID-19



## Advice for parents, carers and people who work with young children (aged 2 - 4)

Since March, many children’s lives have changed hugely. The majority of children who usually attend nursery or go to a childminder are now at home full-time. Even children who are usually at home with a caregiver will not be able to visit their usual places or see their friends. This is a challenging time for everyone. For young children, who find it harder to understand what is going on, it might be quite unsettling. Below we offer some advice about what adults can do to help and support preschool aged children.

There is a lot of information becoming available - this is great but may also be confusing. So, we have pulled together some advice and some of our favourite links in to one place. We hope this will be helpful.



## Look after yourself

It is understandable if you are feeling anxious and worried yourself at the moment and you may have some very difficult challenges to negotiate. Do look out for things that help you to cope. This will make it much easier for you to be able to respond in the way that you want to when interacting with children.

**There is some useful information aimed at adults here:**

<https://www.psy.ox.ac.uk/covid-19-our-mental-health>

<https://www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/blogs/2020/03/managing-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

Children will be looking to the adults around them for clues on how they should be responding and whether they should be worried. So, as much as possible, do try to keep your responses in check when interacting with young children. This is not to say that you need to hide your anxiety; to the contrary, it is important for children to recognise that a certain amount of anxiety and stress is normal and to see that it is possible to deal with it. It is ok for them to know that adults worry too but they can feel more scared if they see adults feeling overwhelmed.

## Signs your child might be struggling



Young children are likely to have noticed things are different and they may well be missing their friends, favourite places to go and extended family. Because of their age, they may not have the ability to understand these feelings or to express them in a clear way. Instead, they may express them in other ways. Here are some of the ways that young children might express how they feel:

- Being overly clingy or following you around
- Having problems sleeping / wanting to sleep in your bed
- Having temper tantrums
- Being overly rigid about things (e.g., what they will eat, what game to play)
- Crying easily
- Having more toileting accidents
- Seeking attention through negative behaviours such as breaking things or annoying their siblings.
- Complaining of tummy aches or head aches.

It is easy to interpret these behaviours as a child being difficult. One of the challenges of caring for young children is knowing how to respond to these types of behaviour, especially if you think they might be signs they are struggling with the current situation.

# How to respond

## Keep healthy routines

Where possible, try to maintain your normal routines as much as possible - for example, in relation to eating, sleeping, playing or downtime. Routines help children to feel safe.



## Calmly set boundaries

Try to set clear boundaries for your child and communicate them calmly. As much as possible, these boundaries should be the same as the ones you had before lockdown. For example, if your child is normally not allowed to sleep in your bed, maintain this boundary and return them to their own bed if they come in during the night. In doing so, recognise that this may be a sign they are struggling a little so respond to them in a calm and warm way, helping them to feel safe and secure.

## Be consistent in your responses

Try to respond to children's behaviour consistently, because inconsistency can make them feel more confused and uncertain. This means that all adults who are caring for the child should also be consistent with one another.

## Keep active and outdoors if possible

The NHS recommends that 2-5 year olds get 3 hours of physical activity a day, including active and outdoor play. This will be challenging during lockdown but, as much as possible, try to keep your child active via physical games inside, going for walks or bike rides and playing in the garden (if you have one). Getting outside in nature can be particularly beneficial for mood if you are able to access a space close to your home.

## Provide time for free play

Try to give children plenty of time for 'free play'. This is play where **children decide what they want to do, how they want to do it and when they want to start and stop**. As an adult, your role is to provide space and resources that support the child's play and then let them get on with it! Only join in or interfere with the play if the child asks you to. This type of play has lots of benefits for children. It allows them to follow their interests and can provide a sense of control and independence. It is absolutely fine to let children get on with things independently if they are safe and having fun.





### Highlight the good things

Whilst it is a genuinely challenging time, do help children to recognise positive things (e.g., lots more time with caregivers, opportunity to play with siblings, more time outdoors etc.).

### Talk to them about their feelings

Children's ability to talk about how they are feeling will vary depending on their age. We have written a version of this advice for older children, which you might want to look at for more tips on handling worries ([LINK](#)).

For younger children the main things to keep in mind are:

1. If your child asks you a question about covid-19 then try to answer it in a way that will make sense to them. There is no need to give them all of the detailed information that is available but try to answer their questions honestly. Young children can get overwhelmed by too much information so be led by their questions. Keep the conversation fact-based where you

can (e.g., that most people get mild symptoms and recover within a few weeks; that pets are unaffected). Draw on information from recommended, reliable sources that are **appropriate to your child's age group**

2. Look out for signs your child wants to ask you something. For example, they might stay closer to you than usual or follow you around. Check in with them every day or two whether they are doing ok and whether there is anything they want to ask you.

3. Look out for misunderstandings and correct them. For example, a child might think that everyone who catches Covid-19 will die.

4. Reassure them that it is not their responsibility to worry about other people. The adults around them are there to keep them safe. Their job is to follow the rules (e.g. social distancing) to try and keep everyone safe. Let children know that the government, the health service, scientists and many others are working very hard to keep people safe.

5. Acknowledge their emotions and help them to understand that it is normal to feel a bit sad because you miss friends or to feel a bit scared about the virus. For example, if a child is worried about their grandparents you might say "I can see that you are worried about your Grandma and Grandpa, I am a bit worried about them too". Recognise that things will be different for a while and that this might mean they sometimes feel sad or miss doing things they normally enjoy. This disappointment is understandable and ok.

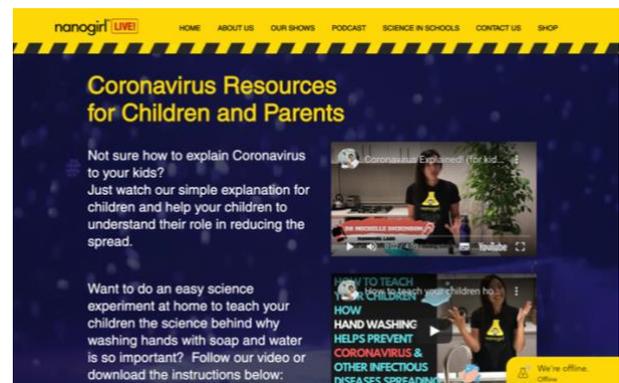
## Where anxiety is persistent and getting in the way of life



Some children will find this more difficult to deal with than others. Some children may already be struggling with anxiety difficulties and the current situation may have made pre-existing worries worse. If you are concerned about a child and their anxiety is persistent and getting in the way of their lives (e.g., their sleep, play, friendships or family life), then they might need some professional help. Your GP will be able to advise further.

## Sources of information for children

**Nanogirl Live** has produced a couple of videos explaining COVID-19 and why it is important to wash our hands / sneeze and cough into our elbows:



<https://www.nanogirllive.co.nz/coronavirus-soap-experiment>

This **comic strip** provides a visual explanation of the COVID-19 outbreak and what we can do to stop its spread:



<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoada/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus?t=1584457518291>

## Other Resources

### To read:

UNICEF's 8 quick tips for talking to children about COVID-19

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

**The Flourishing Families Clinic** (at the University of Sussex and Sussex Partnership NHS Trust) has produced some tips and advice on how to talk to your child about their COVID-19 anxieties

<https://www.flourishingfamiliesclinic.nhs.uk/How%20to%20Talk%20to%20Children%20about%20COVID.pdf>

**Wandering Minds of a Psychologist** explains why it is important to talk to children about COVID-19 and provides concrete examples of things to say / questions to ask

<https://wanderingmindofapsychologist.com/2020/03/06/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-coronavirus/amp/?twitterimpression=true>

**The Guardian** has published advice on both how to talk to your child about COVID-19, and what to cover

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/02/stop-a-worry-becoming-catastrophic-how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-the-coronavirus>

### To watch or listen to:

**BBC Radio 4's Women's hour** covered a discussion about how to talk to children about COVID-19

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p085rjkm>

This **Vimeo** provides tips and advice about how to talk to your child about natural disasters and news events



<https://vimeo.com/394049129>

## Resources for children and young people with specific needs

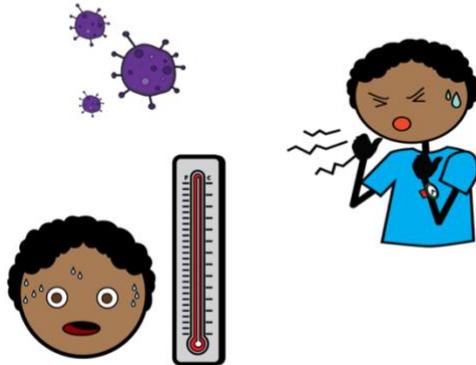
**Anna Kennedy Online** has provided some advice for parents of children with ASC

<https://www.annakennedyonline.com/autism-and-coronavirus-advice-for-parents-by-rosie-weldon/>

## Social story about COVID-19

WWW.LITTLEPUDDINS.IE

The Coronavirus is a virus that can make people feel unwell.



<https://theautismeducator.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Coronavirus-Free-Printable-.pdf>

## Mencap easy-read

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Information%20about%20Coronavirus%20ER%20UPDATED%20130320%20SD%20editsAH.pdf>

## Self-isolating

Dr. Ehrenreich-May has produced a Vimeo on dealing with strong emotions when self-isolating with children

<https://vimeo.com/398401539>

## 10 indoor activities for children if self-isolating

<https://www.babygaga.com/coronavirus-self-isolation-quarantine-activities-for-kids/>

## For parents with school-aged children:

We have a larger resource available here:

<https://emergingminds.org.uk/advice-for-parents-carers-supporting-children-young-people-with-worries-about-covid-19/>

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