

Leaders Plus March 2020

Let's talk about Coronavirus: A practical toolkit to support you and your family

Questions & Answer Session

Do you have any advice on how to reassure children of key workers who will continue to leave the house and go to school?

Sit with them and talk about their worries. Be curious about why they think what they think (e.g. "Why do you think I/you won't be safe? Where did you hear that?").

Remind your child that 'safety' is your responsibility as an adult and you take this very seriously. Teachers also take safety seriously so remind your child that teachers will keep them safe and their responsibility is to learn and wash their hands regularly.

Talk to children about what you will be doing to stay safe (e.g. "You know mummy has to go to work but I take my safety very seriously. I will be washing my hand regularly/wearing gloves/mask/special clothes to make sure I stay safe"). If you are in the NHS and wearing scrubs, gloves etc... take a photo if you can and show your child.

If you are working long shifts, let your child know they can stay in touch with you by sending photos/messages etc... You might not be able to reply straight away but it will brighten up your day and it will help them feel close to you even at a distance (e.g. "You can send me a photo of your artwork I love to look at it when I have a break").

Again – sit with your child when you next see them and check-in on how they are feeling and whether there is anything they want to ask or talk about (e.g. "I really missed you when I was at work yesterday. What did you do? What did you learn? Did you have fun? Is there anything you want to ask me?")

These are all ideas for children with good verbal skills. Younger children (3 and below) will miss you but will not be concerned about your safety.

What do you do if you haven't done these things and acted out anxiety e.g. in an emotional way? How to support a child when they have seen their parents being emotional?

It is totally normal to feel emotional at the moment. Don't shy away from showing your children emotion, talk to them about how you are feeling and what you are going to do to help with making things better (i.e. engage in a committed action/activity that brings you joy). Use it as an opportunity for children to learn how they can cope with big feelings.

Eg. "I am crying because I feel upset, things are very confusing. Do you feel confused too? Lets make a drink and maybe we can read that book/do some drawing/build that tower etc..."

You may shout or get angry at your children, this is a very stressful time and as a family may be in very close quarters together. Don't feel guilty, be kind to yourself. You are human and emotions are



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running high. Apologise to your child if you have shouted. Calmly explain what has happened and what you are going to do now to make things better for you and for the home atmosphere.

E.g. “I am sorry I shouted at you. I don’t like it when you run around screaming and I am trying to work. Mummy feels a bit stressed and I know you are bored. Maybe it is time I take a break. Do you want to play/dance/bake together?”

You may feel overwhelmed that I am asking you to ‘stop’ from your work or chores and focus on your child (who is probably taking up all your time already!). I know this is hard. But I promise that 30 minutes with your child will be more valuable and enriching than carrying on with work while your child is bouncing off the walls and you are getting tense and less able to think.

Remember – this is an uncertain time and the current situation may be ongoing for a while, not days, maybe weeks, maybe months. Try and think of the long-term memories you want to create in this moment. How would you like your child/family/YOU to remember this time? What can you do to make sure those are the memories you all hold on to?

I’ve asked my 4 year old if he’s worried and he’s said yes - principally about the queen dying, does this mean he’s just repeating my language rather than really being worried?

This depends on whether you have said out loud in front of your child that you worry about the Queen dying or not! 😊

I would be curious about this comment. At 4yr children have good vocabularies but their understanding of language is poor. ‘Worry’ is an adult word and children often interpret their own meanings. Ask your child about it (e.g. “I didn’t know you were worried about the Queen dying. What do you think ‘worry’ means?”) Find out more about ‘worry’ and what it looks like for their child. Ask them about the Queen! Why do they think she might die? Where did they hear this? (a 4yr old doesn’t understand the concept of death so this is definitely something they have heard somewhere).

Kids getting various information from their friends and I might not want to share with them yet, but they already talking about it. I cannot stop them discussing things with friends, but how I can talk in a gentle way and offer ideas to divert friends chatting about virus and talk about kids stuff?

You can’t stop your child hearing information from others or what that information is, but you can be a good sounding board for them.

Talk to your child about what they have heard (how and who from?). Be curious about, ask them questions about what they understand (“What do you think about X? How does X make you feel?”) Try and be non-judgmental and instead ask questions so if your child is confused, worried or scared, you can offer factual information (honest, simple facts) and reassure them that they can come and check with you anytime they hear something.

If your child is getting information on their phone/ipad/laptop etc... I would limit their interactions to a specific time of day. Keep boundaries as you would during normal school hours (ie. No phones allowed). Instead, you can offer to plan ‘social meet ups’ on Facetime with friends so they can chat openly in a family space where you can hear what they are talking about.



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Apologies for the bleak question and sorry if it upsets anyone, but how would you tell a young child that someone they know has died?

I talk about death and dying a lot in my work. Have a look at my slides and hold in mind the child's age and stage of development. Children until the age of 7-9yr will not understand the concept of death. It is too abstract to them and therefore they make meaning by using what we call 'magical thinking' (e.g. 'Grandma has gone to heaven' = Grandma has gone to a place called Heaven. Heaven is a real place to them). So it is really important to use the same concepts as when we talk about illness to children:

- Be honest
- Use concrete/specific language
- Stay simple but truthful

Children do not need to know everything. Small chunks of information are best, often children will come back and ask follow-up questions (stay curious, ask them questions, check their understanding, and answer them being honest, specific and simple).

Ideas on what to say when someone dies (for young children up to the age of 11yr)

- X has died. This means we cannot see them again. We cannot give them a hug or a kiss. But we can remember them and talk about them whenever you like.

Whether you can prepare for death or not – a 'remembrance/memory box' is a nice tool that you can use. It is similar to the 'mental health toolkit' I shared on my slides but about the person who has died. You can decorate a box with your child and put in items that remind them of the person (remember the 5 senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, smell). You can bring out the box anytime you and/or your child want to talk about the person and as they get older, this may be a useful way to remember the person and revisit things when they are older (and the concept of death makes sense to them). Do not be surprised if you experience a bereavement in the family and have a child under the age of 9yr if when they become teenagers they start to grieve for the person who died. This is very normal as the concept of death has suddenly become 'real' and their emotions may need re-processing again.

How much of the information you have provided today can we share with our friends and peers? Is there any restrictions?

I do not mind the information I am sharing today being disseminated out to friends and family if you think it will be useful. The slides will be shared on the Leaders Website and I will be offering a link to further resources for you as a group. You are welcome to download resources and share with others. It is really important for me that families are feeling supported during these difficult times. I am also happy to be contacted by email Martha@DrMDC.co.uk or you can come and chat to me on Instagram [@DrMDC_paediatric_psychologist](https://www.instagram.com/DrMDC_paediatric_psychologist) or Twitter [@Dr_MDC](https://twitter.com/Dr_MDC) where I run a live Q&A every Wednesday 8-9pm.



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