

# COVID 19: SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENAGERS

Prepared by HSE Heads of Psychology Services 06/03/2020

## TOPICS COVERED

- Helping children and teenagers to understand
- Ways of managing worry: breathing exercises.

## HOW TO HELP CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Children and Teenagers will often take a lead from adults in terms of how they respond to events, so it is important that adults are not overly worried or anxious in their presence. Every child is different, and parents and guardians know their children best, so they are advised to trust their own judgment as to what will be best for any individual child. Children will pick up on things differently at different ages so, as parents and guardians, we need to tailor our approach.

## YOUNGER CHILDREN

Younger children do not need to be exposed to a lot of news and concerning conversations. Think about protecting their time to play freely. Parents and guardians do, however, need to take some time with children to find out what they already know from the news or from other children.

Children may have questions about what they have heard which could be anything from "it's a bug like a bad cold" to "are we going to die?" Parents need to really tune into what the child is feeling, and show them that they are understood, for example, saying, **"I get the feeling that this is really scary for you"**. Allowing children to talk about their fears and letting them know that you understand their feelings will make them feel much more connected and secure.

Adults can use a calm voice and let young children know that this virus is like a tummy bug or a flu and some people will catch it. Adults can reassure children that lots of countries are working hard together to stop it spreading. In this way, children can understand that there is a new challenge out there but that everyone is working together to be sensible and help each other.

Adults can talk with children about good ways that they can help to stop the virus. With younger children, you can make hand-washing a game (e.g. **'who can make the biggest bubbles?'**, **'wash hands while we sing Happy Birthday twice!'**). Encouraging the use of tissues and 'sleeve sneezes', followed by hand washing, will be important habits to teach.

As schools have closed, it can help children if adults are positive about this, for example, saying, 'there is a bad virus going around so everyone is helping take care of older people and people who are sick by staying at home so we don't spread it about'. Try to help the child see how time at home could be fun and think about ways to use the time positively.

## TEENAGERS

Teenagers are more likely to be using social media and may be getting their information from various sources. For a teenager

who is very worried, negotiating less social media time focused on Covid-19, may be a useful way to help them get things in perspective. Remind teens that a lot of what is on social media is opinion and not fact; parents can direct them to accurate information (*available on [www.HSE.ie](http://www.HSE.ie) or [www.HPSC.ie](http://www.HPSC.ie)*). Keep in mind, they may also be getting positive support from their friends, and, as schools have closed, their access to some fun with friends through social media will be important.

Creating the space to really listen to teens, and understand how they are feeling, will be extra important at this time. Having an open and honest talk with them could help them sort fears from facts.

Older teenagers may be interested in reading the version of this leaflet for adults: **"Covid-19: What to do if you are concerned"**

Children and teenagers are likely to go through similar emotional reactions to their worries as adults, although they may show this in different ways; they may be more withdrawn or challenging than usual and this may stem from information that has worried them or turned into fears. Helping children to develop some breathing exercises and relaxation techniques may be helpful to help them to regulate themselves.

Adults can tell children that they can come and talk at any time, as the children's questions/worries may change as they hear about, or think of, different things. Listening to children and letting them know that you "get" their feelings will help them to feel connected and understood.

Your child may want to spend more time close to you when they are concerned or worried; try to be available to them, as this is a normal reaction. As parents, it is important to stay informed to help keep perspective and to be honest. While it is normal to feel some concern at this time, settling ourselves and our families as best we can, will help us to work together to look after each other.

## WAYS OF MANAGING WORRY: BREATHING EXERCISES

*Try these breathing exercises and see which works best for you:*

**Deep, slow breaths:** Inhale through the nose fully right down into the bottom of your lungs and exhale through the mouth (repeat 2-3 times and return to your normal breath).

**'Tension Down' exercise:** Stand or sit with feet firmly on the floor. Inhale through the nose and, as you do, notice any tension you have in your body. Imagine that you are 'picking up this tension' as you breathe in. Exhale through your nose and slowly breathe out saying 'tension down'. Imagine the tension flowing down through your body, through your feet, out of the room and far away. You can repeat the 'Tension Down' exercise once or twice at a time and then return to your normal breathing. Any time you notice yourself becoming tense, repeat the exercise.

**Breathing out for longer:** Inhale through the nose to a count of 1,2,3,4. Exhale through the mouth for a count of 1,2,3,4,5,6. Repeat these steps for a minute or two, working at whatever pace is comfortable for you. When you are used to the practice, you can stop the counting, so long as the out-breath is a little longer than the in-breath. Return to your own natural breath.



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