

Coronavirus – A survival guide for parents and carers of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

Being out of school for an uncertain length of time, with reduced access to outdoor play areas and social spaces is likely to be difficult for many children, particularly those with SEND. Families living in close proximity for long periods are likely to find this to be stressful.

How to manage anxiety in children and young people

Expect stress – This is an uncertain and unpredictable situation, **stress and anxiety is normal**. Try to **Reassure children** – Children can sometimes believe they are responsible for things that are clearly beyond their control. **Reassure children that it is the adult's job to try to make sure things are OK and to keep them safe**. Reassure children that lots of adults and other children are in the same situation.

Signs of stress will vary for every child. Some children may talk about their worries, others may withdraw into themselves, others may show challenging behaviours.

Some children and young people, particularly those who are older, may be able to self-manage their stress, but this is more difficult for younger children. Adults will need to help younger children to understand and name their emotions, and help them to do things that will reduce their stress level. Exercise, art, drama, music and other creative activities are good choices.

Dealing with challenging behaviours

Regularly check in with children about how they are feeling. Children who are tantruming more than usual, being defiant or acting out may actually be feeling anxious. Pick a calm, undistracted time and gently ask how they're feeling and make sure to respond to outbursts in a calm, consistent, comforting way.

Mindfulness and relaxation exercises to help with managing anxiety

<https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>

<https://www.headspace.com/meditation/kids>

<https://mindfulnessforteens.com/guided-meditations/>

How to talk to children about Coronavirus

- **Allow children to ask questions:** It is natural that children will have questions and worries about Coronavirus. Giving them the space to ask these questions and have answers is a good way to ease anxiety.
- **Younger children might understand a cartoon or picture better** than an explanation.
- **It is ok to say you don't know** - at the moment, there are questions we don't have answers to about Coronavirus.
- However natural and tempting it is, **try to avoid saying everything will be ok** and 'the adults will look after you'. You will of course, but the point here is to remain hopeful without promising things that you cannot - a difficult balance.

- **Maybe your child has an idea too – let them tell you or draw them.**
- **Give practical guidance:** Remind your child of the most important things they can do to stay healthy but find motivation for keeping going, like thinking of a song they want to sing while washing their hands.

Information on coronavirus for children

The BBC Newsround site has a comprehensive section on coronavirus with text and video guidance focusing on tips if a child is worried, how to wash your hands, and what self-isolation means.

www.brainpop.com/health/diseasesinjuriesandconditions/coronavirus

Story books for children about the virus

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Story-about-Coronavirus.pdf>

https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685_319c5acf38d34604b537ac9fae37fc80.pdf?fbclid=I

Social Stories can be a helpful way of sharing information in an accurate and reassuring way. The following links are to two Social Stories which may cover the main issues surrounding Coronavirus. These stories are meant as templates from which parents and carers can adapt to suit their individual child.

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Learning-About-the-Corona-Virus-by-Dr.-Siobhan-Timmins.pdf>

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>

The Sheffield Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has put together a number of Coronavirus resources for children and families, including easy Read communication boards and social stories using Widgit symbols

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/patients-and-parents/coronavirus-resources-for-children-and-families/>

How to try to manage your own worries

Uncertainty can make all of us feel anxious or worried. Find other adults you can talk to about your own worries. Use techniques that help to make you feel a bit calmer - if you are at home, music, breathing and relaxation techniques, distraction (such as watching something funny), and time with family can all help. However, the most important thing parents can do during this very odd and stressful time is to be kind to yourselves.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/#collapse1644b>

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/blog/health-and-other-forms-of-anxiety-and-coronavirus/>

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2020/28-february-coronavirus-anxiety-how-to-cope-if-you-re-feeling-anxious-about-the-outbreak/>

Top tips for Parents and Carers

Ask for and accept help

If you have a partner at home, agree that you'll take turns when it comes to childcare. **Schools have not 'shut down'** – Although most children will not be able to physically attend school you will still be able to communicate with key people in school. Please contact your school SENCo for support and advice; however be aware that they will be very busy at the moment so please be patient in awaiting a response.

Have a routine and structure

- Having a plan and a predictable routine for the day can be very reassuring. As adults we like to know what is going to happen, and children like this too. **A consistent routine lets everyone be secure about the plans for the day.** It is often useful to involve children in creating this routine, so that they feel part of the plan, rather than the plan being imposed on them. You could display the routine using a timeline, or maybe pictures and visuals. Encourage children to develop independence by referring to their own routine/plan themselves.
- **Don't worry if the routine isn't perfect** – Remember, this isn't a normal situation. If you find that planning and sticking to the routine is causing more stress, friction or conflict, then **it's OK to be more 'free-flow'**. Perhaps be guided by the activities that children want to do.
- **Free visual timetables and resources:**
<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/wellbeing-parents/parents-home-routine-and-timetable/parents-home-routine-visual-timetables>

Avoid putting too much pressure on academic work

- **Don't try to replicate a full school timetable** – It won't be possible to replicate a full school timetable for a variety of reasons. Giving yourself and your children permission to accept this can be a big weight lifted.
- It is more important to be spending time together, building relationships, enjoying shared activities and reassuring children.
- **Try to keep school or project work in one place** – This can help to maintain a work/home boundary. We know that different home situations might mean this isn't always possible, so perhaps there might be other ways to 'signal' the end of 'working' e.g. putting away the work and then enjoying a favourite song or shared dance!
- This is also a particularly stressful time for pupils in year 6 or year 11 who have found out that school is closing and they might not be doing things that were planned or exams this year. **Provide reassurance about exams being cancelled** – they may feel like all their hard work has been for nothing. Reassure young people that the Prime Minister has said that all children and young people will get the qualification they worked towards, but acknowledge that the plan is a bit uncertain right now.
- **Play – Play is fundamental to children's wellbeing and development – children of all ages! It's also a great way to reduce stress in adults.**

Be creative in your home activities

- Set up a den in the house or a camp in the garden – This activity can be useful to create a safe place for children and a place they know they can have some quiet time.
- Do puzzles, Lego, visual-spatial activities – These activities tend to be calming as the brain focuses on putting things together rather than verbal or emotion demanding tasks. Offering these activities in the house will be of benefit to everyone as it will help all involved to be grounded and calm.
- Set up a fun project – such as: making a scrapbook of different drawings, paintings, making characters out of modelling clay, picking up leaves from the garden and finding the name of the tree online, taking photographs of wildlife in the garden such as birds, animals, painting rocks with emoji's on them, drawing a cartoon strip or writing a collection of short stories, inventing characters and drawing these, so many things that can be done. Some children may like the challenge of a research project.
- Start a collection – Stamps, stones, leaves and lots of other things can start collections.
- play board games
- Create memories – make a photo album or create a home video of songs or stories.
- Try the ELSA Support 14 days of activities challenge <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-home-challenge.pdf>

Make plans

In the face of events that are scary and largely out of our control, it's important to be proactive about what you *can* control. The **activities below can help children and young people to feel in control, needed and capable are helpful.**

- Invite children to help plan activities for the day
- Helping around the house with chores
- Involving children in decision making, e.g. making a shopping list.
- Cooking together
- Learning a new skill together and/or teaching a new skill
- Implementing routines for self-care and mindfulness

Connect with Others

It is really hard right now not to feel cut off from our family and friend support networks. It is important to find ways to send messages or letters; or use technology to keep in touch family and friends.

- **Help children stay connected to their friends** – Friendships are a key resiliency factor for children and young people. Most children see their friends nearly every day of the week and so not being in contact with them for some time might be upsetting. Is it possible for children to talk to their friends on the phone? Perhaps establish a group Skype or WhatsApp call? Perhaps they could write letters to each other?
- Encourage teenagers to stay connected to their friends virtually, in a healthy way, rather than going out and putting other people at risk. Acknowledge that you know it's frustrating for teenagers to be cut off from friends, listen to what they're feeling and then be direct about how you can work together to make this situation bearable.

Control access to electronics and social media

- **Reduce access to continuous news** – It is important to keep up to date with new developments and announcements, but it can be hard to switch off from the constant stream of news from media outlets and social media. Reduce the time spent hearing, reading or watching news – at the moment it might be overwhelming for adults and children. Try to protect children from distressing media coverage.
- **Supervise children with screens** – It is likely that children and young people will be using screens more often over the coming weeks e.g. phones, tablets, gaming consoles and the internet. If this is the case make sure they are supervised. Ensure appropriate content filters are active – the UK Safer Internet Centre (<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>) offers guidance on setting up parental control. **Try to ensure all children have a balanced range of activities each day.**

Encourage healthy habits

- **Get Fresh Air!** - social distancing does not mean you have to be cooped up inside the walls of your home. It is important for kids to get active outside time every day, and research shows daily time outdoors boosts adults' health and wellbeing.
- Keeping a **consistent sleep schedule**, with predictable times to wake up and go to bed, is especially important to maintaining a positive mood
- Eat healthy meals
- Exercise regularly - You can set up an obstacle course in the garden and time them going through the course. Walking the dog and playing with an animal can also be part of the routine.

Resources

General

The Sheffield Parent Carer Forum has put together a list of links to information, guidance and suggestions about minimising risks, emergency planning, mental health and talking to your child.

<https://sheffieldparentcarerforum.org.uk/news/coronavirus-useful-links/>

NW SEND Regional Network Newsletter: Special edition: March 2020

<https://cyps.northyorks.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Emergencies,%20health%20and%20safety/1.%20Issue%2050%20-%20Special%20edition%20-%20March%202020.pdf>

Social, emotional and mental health needs

Managing challenging behaviours

<https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/information/information-sheets-and-dvds/info-sheets-and-dvds.html>

Advice for helping your child if they are worried:

World Health Organisation – how to help children cope with stress:
https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-withstress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2

Advice for parents whose children are worried: <https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/anna-freud-learning-network/coronavirus/>

Advice for teenagers who are worried: <https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Speech language and communication needs

Resources from the National Autistic Society for autistic people and their families
<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>

A range of resources with illustrations and symbols for students with disorders on the Autism spectrum from Twinkl.
<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/specialeducationalneeds-sen/specialeducationalneeds-sen-communication-and-interaction/sen-autism-spectrum-disorders>

Gina Davis Attention Autism Video links: Attention Autism is an intervention model designed by Gina Davies, Specialist Speech and Language Therapist. It aims to develop natural and spontaneous communication through the use of visually based and highly motivating activities. Gina's primary objective is that the sessions are fun and "offer an irresistible invitation to learn!"
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPPw7lj3k2Zhe19Fb3CO-aq>

Speech and Language activities from Twinkl
<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/search?term=speech+and+language+activities>

Physical and sensory needs

Exercise and activity ideas from the Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy team
<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy-and-occupational-therapy/exercise-and-activity-ideas-for-children-and-families/>

Information for parent/carers of a baby, child or young person who has complex health needs.
<https://www.togetherforshortlives.org.uk/get-support/supporting-you/family-resources/coronavirus-ga/>
<https://www.togetherforshortlives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Minister-Fords-open-letter-to-the-SEND-sector-002.pdf>