

# TALKING ABOUT COVID-19 WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Conversations about COVID-19 need to be managed with care and insight. Children and young people may require support with understanding information and managing their feelings. However, the importance of talking with students cannot be overstated. A positive environment in which they are encouraged to ask questions and express feelings does help. Here are some suggestions you may find helpful:

## A. UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN ANXIETY FIRST

Before any conversations about COVID-19, take a moment to reflect on your own wellbeing and ensure you are feeling calm. Children and young people listen out for the emotional tone of the conversation, not just the content, and look to adults to determine how worried they should be. You may not have all the answers about COVID-19, but remaining calm and confident helps. Look at the conversation as an opportunity to convey the facts and set the emotional tone. If you're feeling anxious or upset, reach out to others and take time for self-care. The World Health Organization provides a [fact sheet on coping with stress](#). You can also call [1737 Need to talk?](#) to talk with a trained counsellor.

## B. KEEPING PERSPECTIVE

Try to maintain normal conversations and/or learning and include playful, fun and child/young person-led topics and activities. Where possible, maintain school and/or home routines.

## C. SHIELDING VERSUS COMMUNICATING

For young children, shielding them from worrying information is preferable. However, it is always important to listen, asking them what they have heard (see section F of this Tipsheet for more information). While adults and older children may cope by learning about the virus, for younger children their primary needs are emotional support and feeling safe. Emphasising that children are safe and that adults oversee keeping people well and looking after people who are sick can help. For older children, communication is key to reducing concern, including providing scientific and general information about COVID-19 and what actions they can take.

## D. EXPRESS HOPE AND CONFIDENCE

Be aware that most children and young people will manage with the uncertainty around COVID-19 well. Express confidence in their resilience and in our community and nation's capacity to respond to this challenge.

## E. FEELINGS ARE NORMAL

Listen for feelings and remember that all feelings are normal and helpful. Acknowledge and validate feelings. Let children and young people know that you think their feelings make sense and that their questions are valid and important.

## F. WHAT HAVE YOU HEARD?

Younger children obtain information from conversations and media. They are more emotive than cognitive, and therefore the aim of conversations and education is foremost to enhance children's feelings of safety and agency. Take your cues from them and invite them to tell you what they have heard. You may ask "Have you heard anything about a new sickness?" For older students, you could ask "What are your friends/whānau saying about the coronavirus?" This will give you an opportunity to find out what they know, answer questions, provide reassurance and correct misinformation without oversharing. If younger children do have some awareness, it is important they don't rely solely on peers or media for information.

## G. FACTS NOT FEAR

Acknowledge concerns and provide facts about COVID-19 and what they can do to reduce fear and enhance their coping skills. Be mindful of language, avoiding emotive words such as plague.

## H. EMPOWERMENT

To channel worries into empowerment, encourage conversations around what can be done and what is already happening. Reassure children that their job is not to worry about the virus. Their role is to become knowledgeable and active, to be healthy, stay safe and be kind to others. Older children can be provided with information and encouraged to take protective measures and help others. Generally, like adults, children are more confident and cooperative when there is an opportunity for choice. Explore how they have coped with challenging situations or helped others in the past to draw out their strengths and coping skills.

## I. BE KIND AND AVOID STIGMA

When talking about COVID-19, be mindful of language. Avoid stereotyping, assumptions about who might be sick, and focusing on specific locations or ethnicities. Use words such as "acquiring" or "contracting" COVID-19 rather than describing the process as "people infecting others" or "spreading the virus". (See the UNICEF webpage on [social stigma associated with COVID-19](#) for more information). Emphasise solutions rather than assigning blame. Remind students that it is possible to be kind to others, even when we are uncertain or scared.

*Be aware of any children who may be experiencing or contributing to stigma or bullying either directly or via social media. Any expression of virus-related prejudices, negative comments and bullying needs to be quickly addressed using relevant policies and procedures.*

## J. EXPERTS OF CRITICAL THINKING

Find out what children have already heard and where they got the information. Build on their critical thinking skills, encouraging them to question, investigate, consider and/ or examine their information sources. This provides an opportunity to compare and contrast misinformation and rumours and discuss media literacy and understanding.

## K. PANNING FOR GOLD

Highlight silver linings within the COVID-19 situation. For example, as was the case during the 1918 flu pandemic, national and global challenges can provide an opportunity to come together as a country and as communities, connecting to and supporting each other with sharing, empathy and kindness. For younger children, you could discuss that school being closed provides opportunities to spend time with pets and family. For older children, discuss the opportunity to review how humanity is living, what contributed to these ways of living, and what can be learnt from this.

## L. USE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORKS

Tap into existing knowledge. Even very young children understand sickness and can be told that this new sickness is a bit like a cold or flu. Most children can comprehend healthy habits. Protective and preventative actions are best discussed alongside other health behaviours such as getting quality sleep, eating well and spending time outside and in nature. Look for ways to build on the understanding older children have of stigma and discrimination.

## M. HIGHLIGHT THE HELPERS (INCLUDING THE STUDENTS THEMSELVES)

Explore age-appropriate examples of helpfulness and kindness. With older children, you could discuss how hard everyone is working to respond to COVID-19, referring to ways that the government, communities, scientists and health systems are responding to the situation, for example, by developing a vaccine, helping people in quarantine and preparing hospitals. Remind older children that we are “all in this together”, highlighting ways in which they can help through behaviours such as linking their physical distancing to protecting the community or taking supplies to people who need help or are in quarantine. When they feel disappointed about missing an event or social visit, acknowledge their feelings and remind them of their social responsibility and that physical distancing protects others.

## N. KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Conversations about COVID-19 and wellbeing are not one-offs. Return to the topic and check in with the students about their feelings and questions.

Resources to support conversations with children and young people about COVID-19

- *Ministry of Education: Talking to children about COVID-19*
- *Ministry of Education: Tips and tools.* Note that these factsheets were developed in response to the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, but the advice they contain is useful when responding to any major traumatic event.
- *Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Tips for caregivers, parents and teachers during infectious disease outbreaks.*

