

What to say as a professional to young people's questions and concerns about Coronavirus

Dealing with Coronavirus is tough for everyone – kids, young people and adults - and us as professionals too. For children with “big feelings” and challenging life events, it can be even harder.

Here are some ideas about how we can answer children or young people's questions or respond to their worries. A few general principles in how to do this are as follows:

1. **Try to ask a question or two** before we respond to a child/teen's concerns – we may be able to get more information about exactly what they are worried about and therefore answer more helpfully.
2. **Express care and sympathy** rather than “dismissing, shutting down or minimising”. As professionals working with children's well-being - we are usually pretty good at this :)
3. **Answer with a matter of fact, calm and confident voice and facial expression.** Children are watching and learning from the adults around them - including us, their trusted teachers, psychologists, counsellors and support workers.
4. **It's okay to put some limits on the time we spend talking about this issue.** We can keep our sessions, lessons and work with young people *more or less* as normal if this seems appropriate. For some children/teens we will need to spend more time on it, but it's also okay to end the conversation. For example, we might say something like: “That's a problem for adults to solve and there are lots of clever adults working on that right now. You don't need to spend much time thinking about that. Let's go back to doing X/discussing Y for a while”. We might also say something like: “We've spent enough time talking about this for now, it's good for our brains and bodies to have a break from thinking about worrying things and problems, let's do /talk about X/Y instead”.

5. We might need to check with or get clues from parents/caregivers about how we answer some questions. Obviously this is not always easy if they are not present with us at the time we are working with children/young people. If we are not sure how parents/caregivers think their child responds best we can phrase answers like this: "Some people think" or "My opinion is....but different people think differently" or "That's a great question to ask you parents/caregivers"

Here are some ideas about questions and answers which might be helpful

"I'm worried that school will close"

Possible extra questions to ask:

What would be the worst thing about that?

Is there anything you are worried will happen if the school closes?

Is there anything in particular that would make things better for you if school DID close?

Do you think there would be anything good about having some time away from school for a while?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

I understand you being worried about that, everyone is having times when they feel a bit worried at the moment

For now, it looks like schools will stay open

If your school does close, XX will come and get you

If your school does close, then you will probably be able to do some learning at home

These are the other kinds of things you might do at home (providing any information we have)

It won't be forever, just for a time - while we wait for doctors and scientists to help people

"I'm upset that I can't have my party/go to my sport game/go on my excursion"

Possible extra questions to ask:

What would be the worst thing about that?

What are you most upset/disappointed about?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

I understand you feeling upset about that. I'm really sorry you are going to miss that. It's very disappointing for you.

I'm wondering whether we can make a list of what else we could do during that time, and write it down – that might make you feel just a little better.

This won't last forever – we will reschedule this/it will happen again later/it will start again later. We don't know exactly when but some time in the future.

Let's think about who you could talk to using technology (facetime/zoom etc) play a game with online instead of doing this (if a home activity)

The government/schools/ourselves cancelling these things for now means that doctors have more time to help people who get sick instead of them all getting sick together – and scientists have a bit more time to make medicines for Coronavirus. You not having this event is a bit like you doing something *very kind and important* for the world. In the future, people will remember how you and the rest of the world did this.

“I'm worried we won't be able to get enough food”

Possible extra questions to ask:

Who told you/how did you hear that we might not be able to get enough food?
Is there any particular foods you are worried about?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

The world has plenty of food for everyone. It's just that when people are worried, they sometimes buy more than they need.

Soon the shops may be allowed to open for longer hours which will help everyone to take it in turns to buy the food they need.

Just because some shops don't have very much food on one day – there are other shops with more food on other days.

You WILL have enough food to eat

“I'm worried I will get sick with Coronavirus”

Possible extra questions to ask:

What makes you worried about that?

What would be the worst thing about that happening?

Is there anything else you are worried about in getting sick?

Are there any times of days/situations you are thinking about this?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

This is what happens to most people who gets coronavirus: they feel a bit hot, they have a cough, they feel tired and sometimes they have a sore body. This lasts for a few days or a week and then they are completely better. It's like a cold or a mild flu. It is very unlikely to hurt you too much, and you will just lie in bed and watch TV/read for a little while.

Young people are much less likely to get very sick from coronavirus than much older people.

** For older kids/young people who are aware of this - There are a small number of young people who do get a bit more sick and it takes them a bit longer to get better. We have excellent doctors and nurses who can help any kids or teens feel better if they do get quite sick**.

“I’m worried I will get sick and then infect other people and/or close my school”

Possible extra questions to ask:

How might that happen?

What would be the worst thing about that?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

If you get sick with Coronavirus, then it will not be your fault

No-one at your school has to know that you are a person with Coronavirus – the school will just tell people that “a student” at the school has been diagnosed with it.

Closing the school isn’t the end of the world - they will reopen it again.

“I’m upset that I can’t see my grandparents/other significant older adults for now”

Possible extra questions to ask:

What would be the worst thing about that?

Is there something in particular about this which is especially upsetting?

Are you worried about how grandparents will go/be in this time, or just feeling sad about missing them?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

I understand you feeling upset about this, it's a bit upsetting for everyone

Let's talk about how we can talk with grandma/grandpa in different ways (phone, technology, sending letters)

Let's think about some fun things grandma/grandpa can do for now while they are having a break from seeing us

“Who will look after me and where will I go if you/my parent gets sick with coronavirus?”

Possible extra questions to ask:

What makes you worried about this?

Is there anything else you are worried will happen if this happens?

Are there any times of days/situations you are thinking about this?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

If I/your parent gets sick with coronavirus, because you live with them, the whole family will stay home together for a while. This will make sure that there is enough time for the Coronavirus to go out of all of our bodies.

You will not ever be left on your own.

If I/they get very sick and you need some doctors to help, you can call XXXX/this person (or 000) on the telephone and they will help you.

“I'm worried I will die”

Possible extra questions to ask:

What makes you worried about this?

Where did you hear that this might happen?

Are there any times of days/situations you are thinking about this?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

In all of the countries across all of the world, almost no children or teenagers have gotten very sick or died from Coronavirus.

We have excellent doctors and nurses who can help any kids or teens feel better if they do get quite sick.

“I’m worried my grandparents will get sick and die”

Possible extra questions to ask:

What makes you worried about this?

Are there any times of days/situations you are thinking about this?

Possible things to say (all of these need to be adjusted to fit the current facts/the age of the child/situation they are in):

Grandpa/Nanna/X/Y is pretty healthy.

Grandpa/Nanna/X/Y is doing lots of things to stay healthy at the moment – for example they are...

We have excellent doctors and nurses who can help people feel better if they do get quite sick.

Remember:

- Check out what their concerns are first
- Sympathise but have confident and calm face and voice
- Provide a small amount of information
- Do short periods of talking about the topic and then distract and refocus

I know there are many more questions and concerns children and teens might have, I will write another article next week with some more questions and answers – at this time we will also have ready (fingers crossed – it’s in the pipeline!) an animated video for children to watch on this issue. Below is a link

to the parent handout version of this article - feel free to download it and provide to parents/caregivers in whatever way you feel is helpful.

Finally, as a professional who is working with young people - here is what I'd like to say to you:

THANKYOU for this calm, caring and giving work you are doing. As you care for, reassure and provide a kind and settled presence to young people - you have the potential here to make a once in a generation positive difference to children's mental health.

Children and young people are at risk of experiencing real trauma as a result of what is going on. We have the tools to limit this - and therefore make a huge difference to positive mental health to many, many families - not just now but well into their future.

I'd like to thank you on behalf of our community for this work you are doing.

Hang in there.

Kirrilie

PS there is a parent/caregiver version of this article below in PDF form, feel free to print and distribute to parents/caregivers if this is helpful. If it's easier to just the link here it is:

<https://developingminds.net.au/blog/2020/3/19/answering-childrens-questions-about-coronavirus>

Download the Parent/Caregiver article in PDF form



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