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Division of  
Clinical Psychology

# MANAGING UNCERTAINTY IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Advice for parents during  
the Covid-19 pandemic

[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)



We know parents are having to make lots of difficult decisions right now, and are worrying about making the best decision for their children. To help you, we are sharing some of the things we know about what helps with anxiety and with making difficult decisions. We are also sharing things we have learned from families we have been working with on what has helped them.

## IT IS IMPORTANT TO MANAGE THE INFORMATION CHILDREN ARE GETTING

Children are hearing lots of complex and difficult information in the media and in conversations with family and friends about coronavirus. Many of their routines and usual ways of living life have changed too. We know that lots of change can cause anxiety and stress in children, and because we cannot say with certainty how things will change again and why, this can cause further unsettlement.

They are also hearing adults talking about things that are causing problems for them (e.g. a parent may be worried about losing their job). These are not things that children can solve, but we know that when children hear these

things they usually start to worry about them too, or want to help solve the problem (e.g. 'I wish Mum did not have to worry about me going back to school, she's got bills to worry about').

We need to find ways of managing the information a child hears, so that it doesn't lead to more worry. As psychologists, we talk about needing to 'contain' a child's distress when things feel uncertain and difficult. Containing their anxiety and distress helps the child to feel that their worries are heard, and that the adult is supporting them to manage the difficult emotions there are experiencing.

## CHILDREN WILL BE AFFECTED BY THE UNCERTAINTY AROUND THE CHANGES TO THEIR LIVES

Even very young children will be affected by changes during the pandemic. This might include changes to their routine, or changes to the amount of time they spend with other children, parents and other adults in their lives. This can be particularly difficult if they are no longer seeing people they love, like grandparents.

With very young children, it may not be possible to explain to them in words.

With older children, the way we need to talk to them changes with age. The British Psychological Society have written an excellent advice leaflet called [Talking to children about illness](#) and this would be useful for all parents

Older children and teenagers may understand more about the pandemic and they will be influenced by information and conversations that they hear.

## WILL MY ANXIETY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC (LIKE MY WORRIES ABOUT THEM RETURNING TO SCHOOL) AFFECT MY CHILD?

We know that children are very good at noticing adults' emotions and they will notice even small changes to how you behave. They will be watching how you react because they depend on you to look after them. It will often be hard for

them to fully understand your feelings though and they may get confused and make the wrong assumptions. How much they understand will depend on their age and how much they have learned about feelings.

## SHOULD I HIDE HOW I FEEL FROM MY CHILD?

It is important for children to learn that worry and anxiety are a normal part of life, and it is okay to feel these emotions. How a child feels about seeing their parent upset will vary from child to child – some will find it more difficult than others. Sharing with your

child that you feel worried or anxious about things can be helpful. It shows them that it is okay to feel this way and it's good to talk to others about how you feel. This can encourage children to share how they feel too.

However, it can be unhelpful when children are exposed to too much information and too much uncertainty, especially when the adult is expressing high levels of distress. It can help to talk about how you are feeling when things are a bit calmer.

## To help them you can:

Praise them for having noticed your feelings. This helps them know that you are not upset with them about it and lets them know they can trust their instincts.

Say a little bit about your feelings. It can help to say what you're feeling, why you are feeling that way and what you are planning to do about the feeling.

You are only human and children really enjoy helping so it is fine to let your child know that feelings can be tricky and that a cuddle from them would be really lovely right now. This will give your child a feeling of pride that they are being helpful to you. You can enjoy the moment and we know that positive contact reduces our heart rate and calms down feelings of anxiety.



## SHOULD I TELL THEM I AM WORRIED TOO?

It's important to be open that some things worry adults too. Try not to overwhelm them with lots of information and discussion about uncertainty. Statements like, 'I don't know what I am going to do' can be very scary, as your child will look

to you for that containment of how they feel. Be honest but try to help to support their anxiety: 'Yes, it's something I think about too and sometimes worry about, but when we know what the next step is, we can make the best possible plan together!'

## I'M WORRIED THAT MY CHILD IS HIDING THEIR WORRIES ABOUT THE SITUATION. HOW CAN I SUPPORT THEM TO BE OPEN?

When we feel stressed ourselves, we may be less likely to notice that others are stressed and worried. Keeping an eye out for the signs of worry in your child is even more important during these times. Children offer us telltale signs that they are worried or affected by something. This might include changes in their behaviour such as becoming more clingy or asking for help more. Other things might include breathing faster, sweating, fidgeting or redness in their face. If you notice

these signs, you can ask them about how they are feeling. 'I think you might be a little bit worried, is that right?' might be a better way of getting your child to share their feelings than open questions such as 'Are you ok?' where children might just say they are fine. Remind your child regularly that it's okay to talk about feelings and show them how to do this by talking about different kinds of feelings – 'I felt really happy today because...' or 'You know what worried me today...?'

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## HOW DO I MAKE DECISIONS WHEN I AM STRESSED AND WORRIED?

Making decisions is more difficult when we are feeling stressed, worried, and anxious, e.g. whether to send my child back to school? The part of our brain that does the more logical thinking can get taken over by the part that controls

our emotions. It's important to try to feel calm when making decisions, so take some deep breaths, remove distractions and set aside some time to work through a decision-making technique.

### What you can do

Decide what the problem is that you are trying to solve (e.g. how much contact to allow my child to have). Sometimes it really helps to talk to someone or voice record the problems and listen back to be able to see what the real problem is you are trying to solve.

Think about the different things that could happen in the end – different options and outcomes.

For each option you come up with, think about what is positive and negative about it for you and your family.

For the things that are negative, think about whether there are any things that you can do to overcome that obstacle.

You may also have noticed some things that you need to sort out first, so that you can do what you decided (e.g. I need to check if I can take my younger children with me into school when I drop my older child off).

Making decisions is more difficult when we are feeling stressed, worried, and anxious.





## WHAT IF I MAKE A DIFFERENT DECISION TO THOSE AROUND ME?

For parents this is a very stressful time – there are lots of different factors which each parent will consider when making decisions. Every family is different and has different needs and so it is understandable that parents may make different decisions based on what is right for them. Every family will have different challenges to consider, and different resources to draw on: single-parent families, families where there are people with disabilities or health needs, families who live in poverty, and families who experience discrimination may have additional things to think about. It might be helpful to seek the opinions of others, and to know what they have decided.

However, try not to feel pressured into making the same decisions if this does not feel right for your family. Taking time to make decisions will help ensure you make the right decision for your family, and that is the most important thing.

**Every family is different and has different needs.**

## HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD MANAGE THE ANXIETY AND WORRY ASSOCIATED WITH UNCERTAINTY?

Having routine and structure at home will help a child feel contained when there are other uncertainties. Having family rules, clear boundaries and expectations will help a child feel more secure. So whilst routines may have changed during the pandemic, try to make a new routine and stick to it. Build in time to spend with your child without distractions, and time where your child can have space to talk about their worries and ask any questions. It is often easier to do this when doing something together rather than sitting and talking. If you are aware your child has heard complex information, spend

time asking them whether they have any questions about it.

Being able to 'sit with' and cope with difficult feelings is a skill that children need to learn, and that parents can support them with. Reassuring them that it's okay to have feelings of worry and showing them lots of praise and affection for sharing these feelings with you will help. Let them know that you are pleased they told you how they are feeling and that you will work through it together. Making sure that your child has lots of positive interaction and positive experiences will help them manage the more difficult feelings.

Notice your child is having tricky feelings.

Think about what it is that has brought these feelings on.

Try so say something that shows that you understand how they are feeling and what you think they should do about that feeling.

Make a positive statement and praise your child for showing their feelings, e.g. 'I can see that you look a bit worried. I wonder if it's about going back to school tomorrow? If it is that I think it's fine to be worried and I am proud of you for being so brave about starting school again. Right now we need to get you ready for bed so that you will be able to get up in time to have a nice breakfast in the morning'.



## SUMMARY

Children will continue to hear information about the Covid-19 pandemic and it could be quite difficult for them to understand the changes to the rules and why adults may feel anxious. Helping them by managing information they hear, allowing them time to express their feelings, and by ensuring the way adults speak about the pandemic in front of them will help them manage their own anxiety and worries.

Further information can be found here:

[Resilience and coping: supporting transitions back to school](#)

[Supporting care-experienced children and young people](#)

[The psychology of play](#)

[Back to school: using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery](#)

[Advice for key worker parents - helping your child adapt](#)

[Talking to children about illness](#)





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BRE30k | 21.07.2020