

Talking to children about self-isolation and social distancing.

[A guide for parents and carers.](#)

Background

As a prevention measure against contracting coronavirus (COVID-19), the government has given guidance on self-isolation and social distancing to reduce social interaction between people to reduce the transmission of coronavirus.

- Self-isolation means staying at home and not leaving the house. For families, this means staying at home for a minimum of 14 days. This applies to people who are showing symptoms of coronavirus.
- Social distancing means avoiding groups of other people, where possible. This applies to everyone.

The advice is most robust for those who are at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus. This group includes people over 70, pregnant women and those with underlying health conditions including asthma, diabetes, obesity and heart disease. The government have also asked those who have symptoms of coronavirus (a persistent cough or high temperature) to self-isolate, and now self-isolation applies to members of the family of someone showing signs of coronavirus.

How this affects families

Your family or children may fall into one of these categories, and you are required to self-isolate for some time. It is likely that your children's grandparents are also self-isolating, and this too can prove distressing for children.

At the time of writing, schools have not been asked to close. However, this seems inevitable. Regardless of when school closure happens, everyone has been advised to reduce social interaction. This includes avoiding contact with someone displaying symptoms of coronavirus, avoid using public transport, working from home, and avoid large gatherings and any sort of gathering in a small space, including meetings with friends and family.

Having to self-isolate as a family can be stressful and can provoke anxiety in children. Children or those young people with additional needs may find it difficult to understand why your family need to take this action. They may also be fearful and worried about the consequences of contracting coronavirus.

Children will look to you as a model of how to react to stressful events. If you appear overly concerned, this may increase children's anxiety. Parents should explain clearly and simply why you are all staying at home and reassure children that these measures are to ensure that people stay as safe and as healthy as they can. Explain we can all help slow the spread of the disease and take positive preventative measures. It is important to talk to children about their fears and acknowledge it is perfectly normal to get worried about illnesses. However, giving them some sense of control over their risk of infection and the effects of the illness may help reduce their worries. It is vital to remain calm and reassuring; by doing this, you can help reduce children's anxiety however it is also important to let your children talk about their feelings and help them express their concerns. Your children may

need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their worries and questions. They should know they have someone who will listen to them and make time for them. Always remember to tell them that you love them and give them plenty of affection

Children's anxiety around Social distancing/self-isolation.

Your child may fall into one of the 'at risk' categories, or your child's school has announced that it will close. Children who feel well and do not have any symptoms of the disease may find it difficult to understand why they have been asked to stay at home. Explain why you are self-isolating, and that this disease can be spread by people who are in close contact with one another when an infected person or sneezes. You can also say that it can be spread by touching a contaminated surface or object. This is why it is vital to protect yourself and each other by staying away from school.

Giving children something positive to do to prevent the spread of the disease can be reassuring for them. This will include washing hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds singing happy birthday (twice) or singing twinkle, twinkle little star (once). Asking children to cover their mouth with a tissue when they cough or sneeze and throw this away immediately—or encouraging them to cough into the bend of their elbow. You may wish to help them to give elbow bumps instead of other forms of touching.

Explain that while these measures may prevent the spread of the disease, it remains possible that someone in your family will get the disease. It is important to emphasise that in the majority of cases that coronavirus is a relatively mild illness like seasonal flu, chickenpox or other childhood illnesses. This is especially true for children and remains true even if your child has an underlying condition. Try to replace children's worst fears with more 'balanced' thinking, "everybody gets ill occasionally"; "we don't usually worry when people have flu"; "getting poorly builds up our immunity so that we won't get sick again".

It is essential to try and stick to a routine when self-isolating. Your child's school will provide work to do at home, emphasise to your children that they are now 'working from home' and try to maintain regular school hours. Also, ensure getting-up, meal and bedtimes are the same as usual. Involve children in household tasks such as helping with the washing up, recycling and laundry.

However, as this is a potentially stressful time, you should also build in plenty of breaks for your children to relax and do fun things (see resources at the end of the document). Schools will try to engage young people through virtual learning environments and social media. You should strongly encourage that your children participate in this.

Spending extended periods in isolation with your family can be an opportunity to do things together, but it can also be stressful. You may feel cooped up and not able to take a break from your family. Your children are likely to feel the same. If you think that the atmosphere is going to become heated, there are some things you can do to diffuse the situation.

Give your family space. Allow your children to do their own thing in their rooms, or if it is safe to do so, allow them to play in your garden or another space where they can remain isolated. Have set times when the family can come together to engage in joint activities, such as watching television, eating a meal or playing a game, but also ensure that you and your children have their own time to do what they want to do. If your child is 'clingy', perhaps due to additional anxiety, maybe arrange an activity which they can do alongside you. So you may be able to work from home, as your children watch a movie. All children must have a variety of activities, and lengthy periods of playing

online games should be discouraged, mental health experts recommend a limit of two hours a day. Five hours a day gaming is considered damaging to a child or young person's mental wellbeing.

Boredom. Being cooped up indoors with not much going on can lead to boredom for you and your family, try to vary things a little even if it's just a short walk around the garden or an open space where you can remain isolated. You could try to have a big family project for self-isolation – it could be a craft project, or decorating, or gardening.

Let it go. When self-isolating with your family, it would be best not to confront an issue that you have with a child or young person. If there are things that need to be addressed, it would be good to do this after the isolation is over where you can talk about things properly. Remember if things go wrong in a 'heart to heart' you have nowhere to go. Perhaps also be tolerant of small things that you would usually wish to correct, often ignoring an annoying behaviour is the best way to stop it.

Be aware. Young people around may be anxious and upset. Look for signs that they are emotionally needy and may want some more of your time. This may include hanging around you and could be an indicator that they want to want to talk. Also, be aware of your own needs, it may be that you can have a break from the children, even if this is just half an hour. Try to do the things that you find relaxing and destressing. This will help you to develop the resilience to deal with the small upsets that can

Self-isolation and when children are anxious about coronavirus

Someone in the family or your children may have contracted coronavirus. Your family will be required to self-isolate for 14 days. This can be very scary for younger children as you have never needed to do this for other illnesses. They may fear that they or someone in their family may be very seriously ill or even die from coronavirus. Emphasise the points made above, that coronavirus, especially in children, is seen as a mild condition. Your child may be aware of news reports and social media posts around the number of deaths associated with coronavirus. Emphasise that children seem to be less susceptible to catching the disease and developing the most severe complications. No child, under 10 years of age, has died of coronavirus. The mortality rate of children between 10 and 19 is also very low, indeed at 0.2%. Emphasise that although coronavirus is mild in children, in older adults it is a more serious condition and self-isolation is necessary to protect older people, including grandparents. Self-isolation may be shown to be an affirmative action which can protect others.

Grandparents

Your child may be worried about their grandparents. Very strong advice has been given that people over 70 should be self-isolating. This means if your children are ill, they may not be able to have physical contact with their grandparents. This may be a substantial loss for your child. The two generations often share an exceptional connection, described as a 'pure love' relationship as there are no responsibility and dependence issues that can cause friction between Mums and Dads and their children. Depending on the age of your child, they may experience a real sense of loss. This may be coupled with anxiety about the effects of the virus on their grandparents.

Ensure that your children continue to regularly speak to their grandparents by phone or through Skype or facetime. Encourage your children's grandparent to make this a special time, see some ideas below: Consider using Skype to:

1. Playing a dressing up game together
2. Read a bedtime story to a grandchild
3. Sing songs and do nursery rhymes with grandchildren

4. Colour pictures together
5. Have a virtual tea party together
6. Have biscuits and milk together

For older grandchildren, you could:

1. Discuss how the school work is going
2. Prearrange to watch a movie then discuss it
3. Read a book beforehand (both of you) and discuss it
4. Send your grandchild a packet of things to make or do (mazes, colouring pages), and after she makes them she can show them to you through Skype
5. Have a grandchild show you the posters they have on their bedroom wall
6. Help them with homework (with parental permission)
7. Share knock-knock jokes

Emphasise to your child that self-isolation is a temporary measure to keep their grandparents safe.

Things for children to do when self-isolating.

Activities for Primary aged children

<https://kinderart.com/blog/tv-free-activities/>

Activities for Secondary aged children

<https://www.suburbansimplicity.com/100-activities-bored-teen/>

Further resources to support emotional wellbeing

This is an excellent website for parents/carers containing the latest psychological news and research.

<https://www.heysigmund.com/anxiety-in-children-after-world-trauma/>

Also from Hey Sigmund. A guide about what to expect age by age around anxiety, strategies and tips on when to get help.

<https://www.heysigmund.com/age-by-age-guide-to-fears>

Talking about world trauma with kids another great article from Hey Sigmund!

<https://www.heysigmund.com/how-to-talk-to-kids-and-teens-about-world-trauma/>

Peace Out, Short stories that help kids calm down and relax. It appeals, particularly to our younger year levels.

<https://bedtime.fm/peaceout>

Brain Pop Video This is an excellent clip for kids, explaining the virus and how to stay healthy.

<https://www.brainpop.com/health/diseasesinjuriesandconditions/coronavirus/>->

Mindfulness for Kids Yoga and mindfulness for kids ages 3+. This is a great resource, and many kids have experience using it in class.

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

Smiling Mind is a great mindfulness app/website for the whole family (Age 7+).

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

Two social stories about coronavirus

<https://theautismeducator.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Corona-Virus-Free-Printable-Updated-2-The-Autism-Educator-1-1.pdf>

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/coronavirus-story-for-children/>

Young Minds: Feeling Anxious about Coronavirus

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus>