

How can you support children's mental health at this time?



Listen

Acknowledge what children and young people are feeling, and reassure them that it's normal to be anxious, worried or to have low moods. Be sensitive to changes in their emotions, and ready to talk or help more practically.

Stick to the facts

According to Jon Goldin, Consultant Psychiatrist in child and adolescent mental health at Great Ormond Street hospital, children's fears and fantasies may be worse than the reality. They may be worried about getting sick themselves, and you may be able to reassure them that the virus has less impact on children, and that, if they do fall ill, you'll be able to take care of them. It's important to stay calm, Dr Goldin says, because any sign of panic will only make children more worried, so model calm behaviour.

Stick to the facts, and make sure the information you share comes from a reputable source: the NHS website, the UK government's information, and the World Health Organization are all good places to follow the latest scientific thinking. Be honest and truthful, but also kind: be aware of what children can deal with.

Encourage children to connect with their friends

If children aren't old enough to organise get-togethers on Zoom, Skype or Houseparty for themselves, parents can help with the set-up and then support them depending on the age of the child and which platform they are using. Please ensure that if your child is socialising online, they are doing so safely. Make sure you know who they are talking to and monitor their online activity. You'll find parent guides to social media apps and chatting online on the school website. Where possible, children should also stay in touch with grandparents and all the other people who matter in their lives.

Maintain a (flexible) routine

It's important to acknowledge the school holidays and allow for a different rhythm to the days. That doesn't, though, mean doing away with routine, which helps to stop everything blurring into boring sameness. Children can be involved in organising the family schedule, including time for gaming, exercise, chores, reading, and unstructured play. Getting through all this will help them have a sense of accomplishment.

Do something for other people

There's lots of research to show that people who help others are happier than those who don't. You could encourage them to do something special for a relative, friend or neighbour.

Exercise

The debate about what exactly we're allowed to do outside has become a bit fraught in recent days, especially as the good weather has brought people into parks in large numbers. The government's advice is still to exercise safely and maintain social distancing and this is really important for children and young people, who need to burn off energy. Go for a (local) bike ride. Take a (socially distanced) walk or run. Even inside, there are lots of ways you can be active. The NHS website suggests exercises that need no more equipment than a chair, a pillow or a sofa. Change4Life (also from the NHS) has ideas for indoor games.

Have fun

Find ways to relax that take you out of yourself and encourage a sense of absorption – painting, reading, playing games, cooking.

Eat and sleep properly

A good night's sleep can make a huge difference to mood. Discourage screens before bed, and emphasise exercise and regular bedtimes. Eat a balanced diet. This is an opportunity to get children involved in planning and preparing meals and try out some of the recipes.

More resources:

The Anna Freud Centre has lots of ideas for self-care compiled by young people – everything from making music to starting a hope box. <https://www.annafreud.org/>

Public Health England has tips on talking to your child and allaying their worries during the COVID-19 crisis. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-parents-and-carers-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

MindEd offers safe and reliable advice about young people's mental health. <https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/young-people>

CAMHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services www.nwbh.nhs.uk/.../camhs-wigan