HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
The world is facing a daunting pandemic – a virus that has transcended borders and had a huge impact on all of our daily lives. As communities, governments and health authorities tackle the spread and effects of COVID-19, it has never been more important for us all to come together.

None of us have ever experienced a health crisis on this scale before, however for children this kind of event can fuel sadness and stress and potentially lead to depression and anxiety. It’s critical in a time like this to ensure they feel protected and comforted.

Together with psychologist and child-anxiety specialist Karen Young, we’ve drawn on Plan International Australia’s deep experience of working with children in emergencies to produce a helpful guide designed to help parents and carers navigate some of the difficult conversations and situations that may come up during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 Let them know that whatever they are feeling is okay

Children might respond in many different ways to news of a crisis. Let them know they aren’t alone, and that whatever they are experiencing or feeling in response to a crisis is normal and understandable: “There are so many people who feel exactly the way you do. You aren’t alone – I promise.”

Validate their fears and feelings, but do this from a position of strength: “I can hear how worried you are. Everything you are saying makes so much sense. What’s happening is scary, but you are safe. It’s scary, and we are safe.”

Whatever you are feeling is okay too. It can be a source of strength for your children if they can see that even when you are anxious, you can feel strong, or even when you are uncertain about a lot of things, you can feel certain that they are safe: “Sometimes I feel worried because it is so unfamiliar, and I know that whatever happens, we will get through this.”

2 Reassure your children

The questions children ask will often be driven by a need for reassurance that they are safe, so let this guide your answers. It’s important they feel comfortable to raise their fears or any questions they might have. Encourage them to speak freely about things that are concerning them. Answer their questions honestly and with as much information as they need to feel safe.

Let your children know that there are many people working hard to keep them safe – scientists, doctors, nurses and emergency responders – and that people are working on developing a vaccine. If they see emergency services in action or hear sirens, reassure them that the people involved in these services are skilled at what they do, and try to focus on the positives.
Help your children know they, and others, won’t be alone

Crises are a time when communities come together. Families, neighbours, emergency workers and government authorities all have skills and resources to contribute – your children should know that they won’t be alone if a disaster strikes.

Talk to them about the charities and organisations that are providing resources and support. Remind them of the good in the world, and whenever you can, share the good news stories about the things people are doing to help each other.

What if this happens to us?

Traumatic events can make children very aware of their own vulnerability and a crisis can understandably trigger fears that something could happen to them. Children will look to the important adults in their lives for signs of safety. When those adults believe they are safe enough, it will be easier for children to believe it too:

“Every time something like this happens, we learn how to stay safer. We learn how things like this happen, so we can stop it happening again. There are people who are working hard to make sure we are safe, and I trust them.”

Ensure your children understand how to protect themselves from COVID-19

Talk to your children about the importance of sanitation and how to prevent a COVID-19 infection. To ensure kids are washing their hands with soap and water for long enough (at least 20 seconds), come up with a fun song to sing while they do so (the Happy Birthday or alphabet songs are good examples) and tell them to count to 10 after using hand sanitiser to ensure it has dried. Make sure that children know to cough or sneeze into their elbows and to always wash their hands after doing so.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR FRIEND, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!
New Zealand scientist Michelle Dickinson suggests educating children on COVID-19 in visual ways, such as using soft toys. She says the virus is best described as a tiny ball, with little dangly bits that are used to attach to humans, but that they don’t have arms or legs or wings – so they can’t move. We can then describe how viruses need us to help them move into our lungs and infect us, so the easiest way to avoid that is to not touch it, not touch our faces and keep our hands very clean.

If they ask, help them understand the symptoms of COVID-19 – shortness of breath, fever, tiredness and a cough – and that so far, it has not affected many children at all. Let them know that even though the symptoms look like a common cold, people who become really sick with the virus will have more intrusive symptoms. Reassure them that many people do not experience any symptoms – and that even when they do, they get better.

Children might focus on the similarities between themselves and the people who have become sick, which will add to their anxiety. To help them feel safe, it is important to steer them towards the differences. These might include their age, their health, or that they live in a country with a strong health system. An important difference is that every day that goes by, we learn more about the virus, and about how to stay safe.

Ask your children what they can do to help others in your community. Encouraging them towards their own acts of kindness will help to replace feelings of helplessness with a sense of hope and the awareness they can make a difference.

Even by washing their hands, covering their coughs, or keeping their distance in public, they are doing something really important – they are helping to protect the people who are more vulnerable from becoming really sick. Perhaps they could write letters to elderly or more vulnerable neighbours, or schedule regular video calls with grandparents.

In the event that schools are closed and self-isolation measures are encouraged, it can become easy for children to feel restless. If possible, get outside in nature for some exercise, fresh air and sunshine. Take a daily walk with your children to the park or around the streets, reminding them of the importance in avoiding crowds and keeping a distance from others at this time. If a daily walk isn’t possible, you could grow plants together in your garden or on your balcony, or draw or paint landscapes outside. Exercise and fresh air helps both physical and mental health.

If you are remaining indoors, create a daily challenge, surprise or game for your children to look forward to each day. Schedule regular video chats with family and friends from school to make sure they stay connected. Older children may enjoy keeping a journal of this time – you could create beautiful, decorated journal covers together. We are lucky to be living in a time when almost everything is online: consider taking virtual tours of museums, parks, zoos and galleries around the world; learn a new language; listen to educational podcasts; or learn yoga and dance moves online.

Know that you don’t have to keep your children busy, or always learning or entertained. Boredom can be a fertile ground for creativity and discovery. There are plenty of ways to learn, and some of the best ones are the ones they discover themselves.

In times of uncertainty, children will benefit from keeping to their normal routine or schedule. As much as you can, keep rules around bedtime, meals, showers, playtime and homework in place. Having a sense of purpose and routine can help both adults and children avoid feelings of stress and anxiety and making sure we feel productive, fulfilled, confident and in control.

With the possibility of school closures and many of us now working from home, it may be unrealistic to keep your child’s regular routine in place. You could consider putting in place set wake-up, bed and meal times; adjusting your children’s usual screen time and allowing longer, independent play sessions. If schools or childcare centres are cancelled, make sure learning or school time is factored into the schedule and ask your child’s teacher for their school schedule to emulate. Setting up a ‘work from home’ station (just like their parent’s) is a fun way to encourage study.
RESOURCES

Education and learning:

- State education government departments have online learning from home resources available online, such as Victoria and New South Wales.
- For younger kids, Raising Children have an excellent guide to play-based learning.
- The non-profit Khan Academy offer free, online education resources for teachers, students and parents.
- Scholastic offer educational projects and resources for families and teachers.
- The Home school due to Virus & School Closures in Australia Facebook group.
- This is an excellent children’s storybook to help explain COVID-19 to your kids.

Activities and play:

- Sesame Street Communities have wonderful ebooks, games, playlists and videos available online.
- Independent play ideas for toddlers to young children.
- Many museums, zoos and galleries have introduced virtual tours so that you can visit from home. Melbourne zoo is live-streaming some of its animals, and why not head to the British Museum or tour one of the National Gallery of Victoria's virtual art exhibitions.

Keeping children safe and resilient through emergencies and crises can take its toll on parents too. Be sure to take care of yourself and reach out to a counselling service such as Lifeline on 131 114 if you are feeling like you are not coping. You can find up to date and detailed health and COVID-19 information through the World Health Organization.