

Guide for schools: Talking to children about illness and death during the pandemic



STEP 1: PREPARE YOURSELF

- Children will vary in how much or how little they want to talk about their experiences and emotions related to CV-19. This guide aims to support you manage these topics when they are raised by children in your school.
- Talking to children about the experiences they have had, or continue to face, may feel daunting.
- The unpredictability of children's questions and wanting to 'get it right' can also create anxiety.
- Children need honest information about what is going on around them, when this is absent they attempt to make sense of the situation alone.
- The most important thing is to be available and listen to children; there is no 'perfect' way to handle these conversations.
- Children don't want to cause their parents distress and often avoid asking questions at home; instead they may ask you as a trusted adult.

STEP 2: PREPARE INFORMATION

- You may want to think about what questions and/or situations feel the most challenging for you.
- For bereaved children check with their family what they have been told and the words used to explain the death to ensure consistent messaging.
- You may find it helpful to look at [this leaflet by the British Psychological Society](#); it's not long and explains what children understand about illness at different ages and levels of maturity.

STEP 3: GIVING PERMISSION TO TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT TOPICS

- It takes courage for children to ask questions, but they may not choose the most appropriate or convenient time in the school day.
- Acknowledge the importance of the question they have asked and use your expert judgement whether to make this a class discussion or arrange a time to talk about this individually.
- Reassure children that adults sometimes feel worried or nervous about coronavirus too, but it's better to talk about our feelings than trying to hide them.
- Children may also be worried about how to talk to peers who have sick relatives or who have been bereaved.

STEP 4: CHILDREN'S COMMON QUESTIONS

- Talk slowly and honestly; people often speak quickly when they are upset and nervous.
- You need to consider the age of the children and what they will be able to understand. Think about what they know and understand already; you may need to check this out with them directly.
- Don't worry if you do not have all of the answers; it is ok to say that this is a new virus and there is still a lot we don't know.
- Encourage and reassure children that it is ok to ask if they would like more information and have questions about what they have seen or heard.
- Children may ask you if you or they are going to die, who will look after them and whether they will catch it.
- *"Some people don't feel unwell at all, some can be very unwell, and some might die. That's why we all have to be particularly careful with old people and people who have other illnesses as they tend to get more ill."*
- Focus on practical information. Reassure children that everyone is taking to the steps to stop the spread of the Coronavirus (washing hands, distancing etc).
- Children often want to know what caused the death and are worried that it was because of something they thought, said or did.
- It is important to repeat that [Name] had Coronavirus, were cared for by the medical team and that it was nobody's fault.
- Remind them of special friends and family as well as their support network at school, all of whom care for them.

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STEP 5: ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT ILLNESS AND DEATH

- To avoid any confusion, you must be very clear if a person has died.
- Avoid 'gone to sleep', 'passed away', 'lost' or 'gone to the stars' as young children will be confused and think the person can come back.
- Families will have many different beliefs about what happens after death but it is important to reassure children that the person is no longer in pain.
- It is helpful to gently explore with children what they believe has happened to clarify any misunderstandings.
- Be aware that children's distress makes it harder for them to take in information.

- "[Name] got more and more poorly/unwell after they went to hospital and they have died."
- For children under 5 you may need to repeat that the person has died and will not and cannot come back.
- For younger children: "[Name] was so poorly that her body stopped working. Her heart stopped and she couldn't breathe any more. [Name] has died."
- Or: "The doctors gave [Name] all the help they could, but nothing worked. They just couldn't make them better, so they died."
- Or for an older child: "[Name] had a really bad infection in their lungs. This meant they couldn't get enough oxygen into their body. And even with all the medicines and machines, the doctors couldn't either so they died."

STEP 6: EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- Be authentic about the emotional challenges of the pandemic without overwhelming children. Labelling children's emotional reactions is powerful and provides tools for them to understand and talk about their experiences.
- It's OK to talk with children about how upsetting and sad illness and death is for everybody but concentrate on the child's individual emotional reactions.
- Sharing some of your own feelings gives a coherent explanation for what children are seeing/hearing and gives them permission to safely talk about their own feelings.
- Younger children may focus much more on the practical aspects of how the situation will change their day to day life.
- Children can rapidly shift between emotional conversations and normal day to day activities; this does not mean they have not taken in what has been discussed.

- "I know school must feel very different now with all the changes and new rules, but we will work it out together."
- "I know this can be sad and upsetting to think about, but it's better that we share our feelings and talk about our worries, rather than struggling with them alone."
- "I know that other children are feeling cross and fed-up that they can't play with all of their friends right now."
- "When I feel sad and upset I find it helps if I"

STEP 7: FINISHING THE CONVERSATION

- Reassure children that these are difficult times but they will not have to manage them alone.
- Children, particularly EYFS and KS1, may return to these conversations several times. This is very normal as they slowly make sense of the pandemic and its implications.

STEP 8: CARING FOR YOURSELF

- These conversations are very difficult for everyone and can be emotionally exhausting particularly if they bring up your own experiences of illness and loss.
- It is very important that you look after yourself; take 5 minutes to check how you are feeling before you start your next task.
- Talk to colleagues about how you are feeling, and share what went well and what you would do differently next time.
- General bereavement resources for children: www.seesaw.org.uk ; www.childbereavement.org