

Helping students deal with uncertainty during COVID-19

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

School communities around Australia continue to face unprecedented changes and uncertainty due to COVID-19. Teachers, students and parents may be feeling overwhelmed, anxious, scared or stressed, wondering what life will look like in the future.

Children are not immune to the effects of uncertainty. With our borders opening and the expectation that Covid-19 will be in our community, it's important to help our students feel a sense of control and create a safe physical and emotional environment for them.

Research tells us that the following recommendations might be useful and assist parents and caregivers to best support their children and reduce worry, distress and feelings of uncertainty.

1. PRACTICE THE 3 R'S – REASSURANCE, ROUTINES AND REGULATION.

Reassurance

- In all conversations with your child, stay as calm and comforting as possible. Reassure children about their safety and the safety of loved ones, and tell them that it is adults' job to ensure their safety.
- Most children won't be as preoccupied with COVID-19 as adults. However, it is essential that children know they can talk to parents about their concerns and have their questions answered truthfully. Let your child know that when it comes to COVID-19, you are there for them (*If you have any worries or questions about what is going on at the moment with coronavirus, you can always speak to me and we can talk it through*).
- With children who seek out a conversation, only provide as much information as they have asked for. It is important not to talk to them too much about it — this can increase children's fear and distress. Follow your child's lead — this will help you to spend the right amount of time talking to them about COVID-19.
- When talking to your child about their feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling your child how they should feel (*Don't worry about that*). Instead, let your child know it is OK to be worried, sad, angry or disappointed. Talking or drawing can help children better understand their own feelings and concerns.

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This video introduces ways for parents and carers to manage media coverage of traumatic events, and talk to their children about their worries and fears.

<https://barrycarpentereducation.com/2020/04/01/emerging-minds-repost/>



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Routines

- We all do better when we have some structure around us (particularly in times of stress and uncertainty). Children need routine and structure as much as they need free time and play.
- Maintain routines to provide children with a sense of safety and predictability (e.g. regular bedtimes and meals, daily schedules for school work, physical activity chores, play and time with you). Predictable routines provide a stable base for children.
- Always follow good cyber-safety practices and routines in your home.

Regulation

- 'Emotional literacy' – the ability to recognise and name our emotions – is an important part of a child's development. Being able to recognise when they are feeling sad, angry or worried will help your child to choose the best way to cope with these feelings (self-regulation).
- When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating their stress response systems. To help them manage these reactions, it is important to both validate their feelings (*I know that this might feel scary or overwhelming*) and encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate (e.g. exercise, deep breathing, mindfulness or meditation activities, regular routines for sleeping and eating).
- Creative activities can be a great way of helping children to recognise, understand and manage their emotions. You could invite your child to draw a picture of how they're feeling; or create a feelings chart that allows them to point to the emotion they're experiencing. Role playing and storytelling can be useful ways to help older children talk about how they're feeling.
- Children may struggle with disappointment as the rules and information around Covid-19 continue to shift and change. Let them know it's okay to feel this way, but also use it as an opportunity to build their resilience by pointing out that you'll support each other through the bad news, and keep focusing on the good things we have in our lives.

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2. PROVIDE AGE APPROPRIATE INFORMATION.

- Children tend to rely on their imaginations when they lack adequate information. Adults' decisions to withhold information are usually more stressful for children than telling the truth in age-appropriate ways. Adults should instead make themselves available for children to ask questions and talk about their concerns. They might, for example, provide opportunities for children to access books, websites, and other activities on COVID-19 that present information in child-friendly ways.
- Limit children's exposure to media coverage, social media, and adult conversations about Covid-19, as these channels may be less age-appropriate. Ongoing access to news and social media about Covid-19 and constant conversation about threats to public safety can cause unnecessary stress for children.
- When answering your child's questions, find out what they think they know about the issue (e.g. through social media or their friends) before answering.
- Keep your answers simple and appropriate to your child's developmental level.
- If you don't know the answer, offer to try to find it out for them. If they say 'Don't bother', you can probably leave it. However, if the answer is important to you personally, you might say 'That's an interesting question. I'm going to try and find out the answer because I'd be interested in knowing it.'
- Don't make promises you can't keep (*Things will be back to normal by your birthday*).

3. KEEP CHILDREN BUSY.

When children are bored, their levels of worry and disruptive behaviours may increase. Children need ample time to engage in play and other joyful or learning experiences without worrying or talking about COVID-19. Work with your children to come up with a list of activities they can do if they find themselves bored at home and not sure what to do. Include physical activities to keep them active. Put a copy of the list somewhere in the house where your children can easily see it.

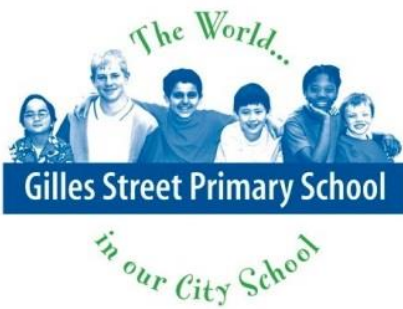
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4. TAKE NOTICE OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS.

- Think about the values, skills and behaviours you wish to encourage in your children. There are many opportunities to teach your children important life skills (e.g. being caring, helpful, and cooperative; getting on well with siblings; taking turns). Pay careful attention to your children's behaviour. Whenever they do something you like and want to encourage, specifically name the behaviour and then use plenty of



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praise and positive attention to encourage it in the future — you will find this is a very powerful thing to do. *(That was lovely that you suggested we phone your grandmother. That's so kind that you thought to do that. She really appreciated it or Thank you for reading quietly and waiting until I was off my work call to ask me your question.)*

- Parents serve as role models not only through direct interactions with their children, but through the examples they set with their attitude and behaviour within the family and in the outside world. Children will look at you and learn from the skills you use daily to deal with stressful situations. Be calm, honest, and caring and demonstrate a positive attitude to children.

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5. SEE YOUR GP IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR CHILD.

If you have significant concerns about your child and want some professional help, you can get a referral to a psychologist or mental health professional through your GP and they will let you know how to proceed.

6. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

It's difficult to help someone else with something that you are struggling with too. In this unprecedented situation, we are all struggling at some level. That's ok. In fact, it's normal. Most of these strategies for helping your child cope with uncertainty will help you cope too. When you use strategies to help you deal with uncertainty in a healthy way, you're teaching your child how to do it too. Though we are facing many uncertainties today, one thing is for sure – knowing how to cope with uncertainty will help your child navigate life's joys and challenges.

cafb.org

Here is an illustrated guide for coping with adversity from the World Health Organisation. 'Doing what matters in times of stress' aims to equip people with practical skills to help cope with stress. A few minutes each day are enough to practice the self-help techniques. The guide can be used alone or with accompanying audio exercises and is available in multiple languages.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927>



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RESOURCES

Childtrends

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

Triple P Positive Parenting

<https://www.triplep-parenting.net.au/au-uken/get-started/parenting-during-covid-19/>

Unicef

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/8-teacher-tips-student-mental-health>

Emerging Minds

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/supporting-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/>

Cafb.org

<https://www.cafb.org/therapists-corner-how-to-help-kids-cope-with-uncertainty-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>



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