



the british  
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promoting excellence in psychology & their Families



Division of  
Clinical Psychology  
Faculty for Children, Young People

ADVICE

# Talking to children about illness

**Adults have a key role** in helping children understand what is going on, providing information and reassurance, limiting media overload for children, and being aware of how their own reactions might impact on children.

We've written this short leaflet to give health professionals, educational professionals, parents and early years providers an informed understanding of children's understanding at different developmental stages.

We all have basic needs that we need to meet before we can move onto higher level needs. Psychologists think of these as the bottom of a pyramid of things we all need. We need to meet these most basic needs, like food, water, sleep and safety before we can move onto anything else. Safety is one of these most basic needs and essential for good psychological development. Covid-19 is making many children (and adults) feel unsafe.

Much of the information that children hear about Covid-19 is intended for adults. Because children don't understand risk in the same way that adults do many children are unsure of how worried they should be but many are very worried indeed – about themselves, their parents, grandparents, their pets, and their friends.

Children are not little adults and their understanding depends on their developmental stage. This means that we need to talk to children about what is happening at a level that is developmentally right for them. Not all children will need the same things in order to help them feel safe – for example some children have a higher need for sameness and predictability, others have health conditions that make them more vulnerable to illness than others, and some children were already experiencing feelings of anxiety or low mood before Covid-19 came along and made everyone else anxious.



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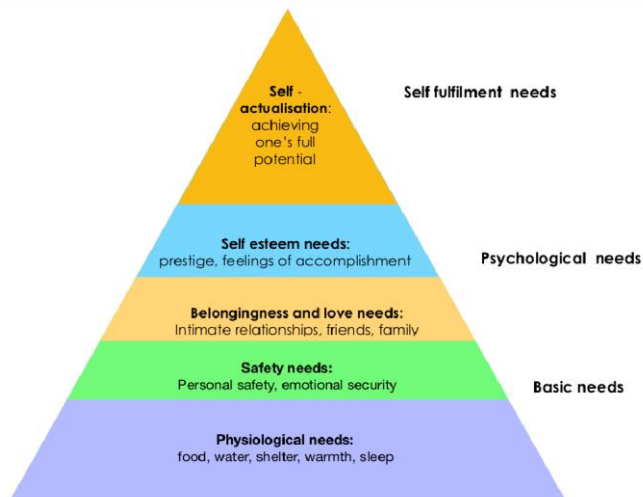


Diagram based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Maslow, A.H. (1943) A theory of human motivation, *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–96.)

## TALKING TO CHILDREN DEVELOPMENTALLY AGED 0 – 3

### When talking to children aged 0–3 it is important to understand:

- They will struggle to understand things that they can't see and touch, so understanding what illness means will be difficult unless they can see it (such as someone sneezing).
- Schools are still responsible for the education of their children and young people. Reassure parents that during the time that children are away, they will have access to learning materials as appropriate. Many schools use online learning platforms already and it may be necessary to provide more detailed information to parents about how to access and use these services.
- They will not understand what causes illness, especially things that go on inside our body.
- They are focused on what is going on right now and have little understanding of the future and of time.
- Their basic needs will be around food, sleep, play, and closeness. Interruptions to these things will have the biggest impact on their emotions and behaviour.
- They will base their understanding on what has happened to them before, and think it will happen again.

### WHAT THEY MAY DO OR SAY

#### Children aged 0–3 will:

- Get easily confused or misunderstand things they hear people say.
- Show their distress at change in routine through: being more clingy, changes to their toileting, eating or sleeping habits.
- Say things that seem to not make sense to us as adults.
- Not understand why adults are scared, worried or sad.
- Carry on with playing even when things around them may be difficult (e.g. if a loved one is unwell).



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

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- Don't use complicated explanations. Stick to short sentences and focus on the here and now – what you are doing today and tomorrow.
- Be honest but don't add lots of detail.
- Focus on structure and routine – keeping things as normal as possible.
- Spend time playing with your child – try to make sure you limit your time on devices.
- Use play with dolls and stories to explain situations or concepts that it is important for the child to understand.
- Where you have to make a change to a routine, keep explanations honest but brief (e.g. Mummy is working from home. This means she will be in the house with you lots instead of going into the office).
- Limit background conversations and news that the child can hear.

## TALKING TO CHILDREN DEVELOPMENTALLY AGED 4 –7

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### When talking to children aged 4–7 it is important to understand:

- Children are focused on their immediate environment – what is going on around them, what is happening next and soon, and how they feel right now.
- They will struggle to understand concepts that they cannot picture in their mind.
- Complicated things like illnesses they can't see may be difficult to understand.
- They will understand illness in terms of simple symptoms, like a cough or runny nose.
- They will struggle to separate out that symptoms of illness may be different – such as the idea that some coughs are OK, and others are more serious.
- They will be starting to understand that you can catch some illnesses but they may get confused about this and think you can catch all illnesses.
- They will know that some behaviours can help keep you healthy, like washing your hands, however they might get confused and think it will definitely stop you getting ill.

## WHAT THEY MAY DO OR SAY

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- Children may increase behaviours they think will keep them healthy that they have heard adults talking about before e.g. saying they want to eat healthily or exercise to be healthy and fit.
- Children are exposed to stories and fairy tales at this age and you might hear them playing out illness-related stories with their toys – some of the things they do may be confusing or not accurate.
- Children may 'fill in the blanks' with their imagination or seemingly illogical or inaccurate explanations – you may wonder, 'where did they get that from?'
- Children may blame themselves or think something was their fault (e.g. grandma is ill because I did not wash my hands).
- Carry on with playing even when things around them may be difficult (e.g. if a loved one is unwell).



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- They may ask a lot of questions repeatedly as they try to make sense of information they have heard with their limited understanding of illness.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

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- Use play and stories to shape a child's understanding, where necessary and appropriate. Characters in the story can be used to correct misunderstandings.
- Make sure that the child understands cause and effect (e.g. washing hands will **help stop** germs spreading rather than **will stop**).
- Answers do not need to be increasingly complex – if you have said enough to your child, repeat the information you have given consistently. If you are not sure or don't know, say so instead of making something up!
- Help your child label and name their emotions by labelling and naming yours.

### TALKING TO CHILDREN DEVELOPMENTALLY AGED 7–12

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#### When talking to children aged 7–12 it is important to understand:

- Children can now see themselves as different to others and understand that other people have different needs and perspectives.
- Children still think about things from their own perspective so will be influenced mainly by that.
- They have an understanding that illness can be lots of different symptoms, and that lots of things go on inside their body which they can't see.
- They understand that medicines and following doctor's advice can help them get better but still need a lot of help and prompting to follow advice.
- They are more able to understand concepts of time and permanence, and will understand that death happens to everyone and is permanent.

### WHAT THEY MAY DO OR SAY

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- Not wanting to voice concerns for fear of upsetting parents, friends or others.
- Difficulty verbalising distress – they may not know why they feel worried or stressed.
- They are more likely to experience stress as physical symptoms, like a headache, a stomach ache or wanting more physical contact.
- They will ask more questions about the impact on other people or on wider changes to life than younger children.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

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- Encourage emotional expression through drawing, stories, questions – a feelings box where children can write down their questions and thoughts and discuss them with an adult can be helpful.
- Normalise different feelings appropriately and talk about what you are doing to help with your worries or feelings.



- Make sure your child is active (provided they are well) – this gets rid of some of the chemicals in the body which are released when we are anxious and will help with physical symptoms of stress.
- Make sure children don't take on adult roles in a desire to help others.
- Ensure explanations are accurate and explain differences between conditions – e.g. children may have heard that having a cough might be worrying, and they will need to understand that not all coughs are worrying.

### TALKING TO CHILDREN DEVELOPMENTALLY AGED 13+

#### When talking to children aged 13+ it is important to understand:

- At this age, children have a good understanding of time, they can imagine the future and lots of possibilities. As a result, their imagination may mean they are able to worry more about things that haven't happened or might not happen.
- Teenagers can understand the different causes of illness, that illnesses can be very different and can understand the role of stress and worry on the body.
- Teenagers are still mainly influenced by their friends – so even though they can understand a lot of information about illness, what their friends are doing and saying may impact on how they behave.
- Teenagers are developing their own identity and a sense of who they are in the world. They are likely to look at their own sources of information and parents become less defining in how they think about information and how they behave.

#### WHAT THEY MAY DO OR SAY

- They might ask less questions of parents, and turn to other sources of information such as social media, their friends and news outlets.
- They might take advice from friends or other social influences on how to behave and act and be conscious of not wanting to act differently.
- There might be increased awareness of how illness and health behaviour fits with what is important to them.
- They might be more concerned with social, moral and emotional aspects of illness and how illness is having a broader impact. This might lead to more distress and sadness than in younger children.
- They might want to find ways of helping others.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Continue to offer space for support, affection and discussion.
- Ask open questions such as, 'What did you think of the news that...?'
- Provide them with information from reputable sources 'I came across this today, what do you think of it?'
- Support social opportunities and discussion with peers.



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- Offer choice and promote independence within the context of what is possible and appropriate – if a teenager can't go out, giving more choice about activity within the home can be helpful.
- Suggest ways of helping others that are safe and appropriate.
- Offer reframes about worries – how can the young person think differently about the situation which helps them find a positive in the situation?

