How to talk to your child about the Coronavirus

There are lots of big changes happening around us and panic can easily take over. It is normal to be feeling confused, scared, and angry. Children can feel particularly anxious. How can you help?

First: look after yourself

As we face so much uncertainty, we can feel powerless and frightened. It is important for us to manage our own fear so that we can support our children with theirs.

1. Use your PAUSE button: when you start to worry, stop what you are doing and take a few deep breaths.

2. Notice your thoughts: when there are gaps in what we know, our mind naturally wants to fill them up with stories. Unfortunately these stories often make us worry and can grow and grow like a snowball. When this happens, pause and notice your storytelling mind; it is working hard to try to keep you safe, but remind yourself that you don't know yet if these thoughts are true. Take a few more deep breaths.

3. Avoid excessive exposure to news updates: they can feed our fears, which can make us 'flip our lids'. We find it very hard to think straight, which can also make us feel less patient than usual with our children.

4. Attend to your physical well-being by breathing deeply, taking regular exercise and where possible, go outside. It is mid-March now which means better weather must be due. Go outside, enjoy the fresh air and sunshine, whilst maintaining a safe distance from others. Maintaining a regular sleep pattern can also help to maintain a sense of well-being, so try to get 8 hours a night and stick to a similar bed-time and get up time each day.

5. Stay connected with your loved ones through calls, texts, and the internet as much as you can.

Now… how to support your child

1. Reassure their story-telling minds: children have big imaginations and their storytelling minds might be making up all sorts of scary stories about the virus and what might happen to them and their loved ones. Talk about it with your child: but first, ask them what they have already heard about the coronavirus. This gives you a chance to reassure any fears and to correct any rumours that aren't true. It is also important to limit their news exposure.

2. Comfort their 'flipped lids': listen to your child and help them to name their feelings. If they find them hard to talk about, perhaps they can show you how they feel using drawings or acting them out with toys. Empathise with all feelings. And then reassure them that:

    - Grown-ups are doing all that they can to keep them and everyone safe.
    - There are experts working really hard to find a cure.
    - There will be big changes: some places, like schools, have closed to help to better control the spread of the virus.
    - There are also lots of positive things happening: people are helping each other in creative ways around the world: "Can we think of ways that we can be kind to each other and our neighbours?"

3. They may have many questions: it is OK for you to say that you do not have the answer but that you can think about it together. Empathise with how difficult it is not to know what will happen. Then find something they can repeat to themselves to help them feel better: "My job is to wash my hands and sneeze/cough into my elbow. My adults' job is to keep our family as healthy as possible and they will do their best."

4. Offer them a sense of control: taking belly breaths, washing hands, wiping surfaces after they have used them, and do offer them choices wherever you can.

5. Create a routine and structure: this can feel reassuring, especially when things are uncertain. Creating a daily schedule can be helpful but also allow some downtime: children release stress and big emotions through play, movement and creative activities. Creating new family rituals can also help everyone feel safe and connected.