

COVID-19: Talking to children and families about COVID-19

Many of the children and families we work with may experience barriers to receiving accessible information about COVID-19 and help to make sense of what this means for their daily life, their family and what they should plan for.

Why you should talk about the pandemic

In the way that this pandemic has impacted on each of our lives, as practitioners, talking about the pandemic will need to be a part of your conversations with children and families so you can:

- support them to understand the risks and how to keep themselves safe
- talk about how the pandemic may increase the existing difficulties they face that put their child at risk
- let them know about any changes in the ways you may work with them because of the pandemic
- put plans in place to support them and maintain connections with others
- understand if they are experiencing symptoms or have been diagnosed so you can protect others and yourself.

How to talk about it

What you talk about with children and families will vary depending on the reason for our involvement with them. Many of these specific considerations are covered in other topics in this set of Covid-19 practice guidance. There are some basic aspects that are relevant to any child or family we work with.

Stay up to date on [official advice](#).

Ask what they know about the pandemic. Explain key areas including:

- what the virus is and what the symptoms are
- how the virus is contracted
- how to reduce risk by keeping hands clean and not touching face
- who is most at risk
- the current official advice about social distancing and other instructions
- [what to do and where to go](#) if anyone in their family gets sick.

Use simple words and specific descriptions. And be conscious of words that could cause fear or distrust such as isolation, control and mandates.

Use basic words and stay away from jargon. For example:

Don't say 'use basic hygiene practices'.

Instead you should describe what these are: 'you need to wash your hands with soap and warm water for 30 seconds after you go to the toilet and before eating, try

not to touch your face or other people's faces; cough and sneeze into your elbow or tissue and then throw that tissue in the bin.'

Don't say 'social distancing'

Instead describe the current advice simply.

Demonstrate hand washing wherever possible.

Give them translated information if they cannot read or understand English fluently and if they have limited English verbal skills.

[Translated public health information](#)

[How to arrange an interpreter](#)

Repeat information consistently and regularly. Especially if the family member has difficulties remembering information or understanding new concepts because of disability, substance use issues or mental health issues.

Use visual aids like posters, handouts and videos.

It is important that any COVID-19 information shared with families come from official sources.

[Healthdirect have a variety of visual aids and videos](#)

Let them know that the way you work with them may be a little different. This may mean checking in more often by phone for instance but that this may not always be the case as you may visit too.

Let them know that our services to the community are still happening and reassure them that they can still contact the office. Make sure to let them know that these changes are to help make sure that they are kept safe so that they do not assume it is simply about worker protection.

How to talk to the child about COVID-19

It is important to include children in conversations in ways that they can understand and so that they can learn the skills to stop the spread of germs. If they are kept in the dark this can make them worry more.

Some children who do not attend school regularly or who have parents facing problems may not have had a caring adult talk with them about COVID-19. Answer their questions and show them how to wash their hands while singing a song; and how to cough and sneeze properly.

Access helpful resources

These resources can help you plan how to talk with the child but can also be provided to parents, carers and supports so that they can use them too.

Use this COVID-19 social story as a tool to have a supportive conversation.

[UNICEF](#) has practical tips about how to talk to children about the virus.

[Behind the News](#) on the ABC has some helpful videos that talk about the virus, hand washing and answers children's questions.

The [Australian Childhood Foundation](#) has set out some thoughtful advice about how parents and carers can emotionally support children during the pandemic.

Ask about their worries

All children are likely to experience worries at the moment but children we work with may have additional or unique worries. For instance if their parent is not well because of problematic use of substances or mental health issues the child might be particularly worried how they will cope. Children in care may worry about family members who live away from them. See more about that here.

Some children may worry about Elders in their community or migrant children may be concerned about family and friends from their country of origin.

Be reassuring, curious, warm and ask them what you can do to help them feel less worried.

Understand their role in the family

Learn about the role that siblings may have in keeping each other safe. We do not want to take this role away from them, but nor do we want them to feel the pressure of burdens. It is important to understand what additional strains and pressures they may be experiencing in the context of the pandemic.