

Coronavirus: addressing pupil anxiety

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Tips for staff to support younger children and links for older pupils to help keep on top of coronavirus-related worries.

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Anxiety is rooted in the unknown. Help pupils with their worries by having open conversations and giving them facts and practical steps about what they can do.

Tips for talking to younger children

We worked with educational psychologist Catrin Harley to put these tips together.

1. Deal with the news head-on and talk about it openly and calmly, giving them the facts

- Give them age-appropriate information – take a look at:
 - BBC Newsround hub – regularly updated with information and advice
 - #covibook – for under 7s
- Educate them about reliable sources of information and how some stories on social media may be based on rumours or inaccurate information
- Encourage them to take breaks from listening to or reading the news – overexposure isn't helpful

2. Encourage questions

- This will give them the confidence to reach out and ask, if they have anything to ask
- Use comforting tones and be honest when answering questions – it's ok if you don't have all the answers
- Allow for repetition – children tend to repeat themselves when they're feeling uncertain or worried, so you might have to answer the same questions more than once as they seek extra reassurance

3. Be a role model

- Recognise and manage your own worries first
- Be open about sharing this with pupils – e.g. I'm also finding the news a bit worrying, so I'm doing X which makes me feel calm

4. Let them know it's normal to be concerned

- If needed, reassure them that the effects of this virus on healthy young people are very mild

5. Promote awareness of our body's immune system

- It's constantly working against germs without us knowing. We can't and don't need to control this process
- Explain that we're taking precautions against this particular germ because it's a new one which our bodies haven't come across before
- Remind them of the benefits of healthy eating, sleep and exercise – which help to fight germs

6. Be aware of children with higher levels of anxiety (e.g. those with existing phobias or obsessive-compulsive disorders)

- Get them to do activities such as counting, ordering and sorting tasks which can help with heightened levels of anxiety
- Encourage them to use relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing

- Detect any obsessive or compulsive behaviours early and intervene before they become entrenched patterns of thinking. Do this by challenging unhelpful thoughts and assumptions. Frame worries as situation-specific by relating them to the current situation, which is temporary and unusual

7. Keep doing your bit to help children reduce the spread of germs

- Use our posters to remind pupils how and when to wash their hands
- Encourage them to sing 'happy birthday' twice when they're washing their hands

Be sure to share these tips with parents too, so they can support their children during potential self-isolation or school closure.

Share these tools and steps with older pupils

As well as the concerns we're all feeling right now, older pupils are likely to also be worried about their exams and life after school.

Reassure them that more guidance will come and tell them you'll share any news with them as soon as you have it.

In the meantime, equip them with the resources below

Encourage them to put these steps into practice:

- YoungMinds: practical steps to take if you're anxious about coronavirus
- Mind: how to take care of your wellbeing if you need to self-isolate

These resources can help to dispel myths:

- Mythbusters from the World Health Organization
- Data visualisation pack from Information is Beautiful (regularly updated)

Plus, you should find that some of the tips in the section above also work well when talking about the virus with older pupils.

Sources

Thanks to Catrin Harley from Lincolnshire Psychology Services for her advice.

We also used the following:

- Talking about coronavirus - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- How to talk about scary world news - Mental Health Foundation

Next steps

- [Resource hub: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – what you need to know](#)

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