



Tips for talking with pre-teens about the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19)

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is having a major impact on our health and way of life. That's why we have developed this resource to help parents dealing with the stress of coronavirus in their own life and their children.

It's important to recognise that some of the activities suggested below may not be feasible or appropriate depending on what the latest government regulations are – so it is important to stay up to date on that information from credible government sources. See [the Australian Government's health alert](#) for the latest updates.

Show your pre-teen that it's possible to continue to do what is important to oneself while practicing healthy behaviors.

Everyone is working hard to manage the virus and the impacts on our lives. Explain to your pre-teen that they too, can continue to do what is important to them while practicing healthy behaviours.

Give them a sense of control by explaining what they can do to stay safe

- Avoid touching their mouth, eyes, and nose, which are places where the germs can enter their body.
- Wash their hands regularly for at least 20 seconds, with soap and water, before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
- Sneeze or cough into tissues (and throw them away) or sneeze or cough into their elbow. These behaviors help keep germs from traveling and making other people sick.
- If unwell, avoid contact with others (stay more than 1.5 metres away from people).
- If you need to adjust plans, be transparent and direct with your pre-teen so that they understand the rationale behind the decision. For example, if you have to postpone travel because of advice about safe travel, then let your pre-teen know that. Check [Smartraveller](#) for up-to-date information. You can add that the trip was postponed because it was not a necessary trip, and that the family will continue to do what is necessary each day.

Actively manage your own wellbeing by maintaining routines where possible, connect with family and friends (even if not in person), staying physically active, eating nutritious foods, and not holding group gatherings at home. Model good media habits.

Make time to talk

Find the right time to talk with your pre-teen. This might be when your pre-teen finishes their schoolwork, at dinner time, or in the car. When they are ready to talk, give them your full attention.



Find out what your pre-teen knows

It's a good idea to start by asking your pre-teen what they know about the virus and whether they have any questions. For example, "On the news today, they were talking about coronavirus. Are your friends talking about that? What are they saying?"

Explain coronavirus in a way your pre-teen can understand and model calmness

Even though you may be concerned yourself, it is important to use a calm, reassuring tone and keep to the facts. Your pre-teen may be looking to you to gauge how worried/afraid they should be. For example:

"That's right, some people are getting sick with a germ. Some people feel just a little bit sick. Some people get a fever and a cough. Sometimes, the cough can make it hard to breathe easily. Most of the people who got the virus will stay at home to get better. Some people who are very sick are being looked after by doctors and nurses."

"I heard you talking with your friends about how you catch coronavirus. The virus spreads through things like sneezing, coughing and touching infected things. That's why good hygiene and hand-washing are really important. They help to protect everyone."

Take cues from your pre-teen

Some young people might not be worried about coronavirus. But some might be frightened, upset or worried. They might be worried about the virus itself or about how it might affect their lives. Some of them might respond by withdrawing and isolating from friends and events.

Ask your pre-teen how they are feeling and listen to what they say. You can also ask what they need to feel better.

It might reassure your pre-teen if you share your own feelings and let them know what you are doing to cope with them. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading and offer to look up information together. For example:

"I can see that you're worried about grandpa getting really sick. I love how caring you are. If anyone we know gets sick, the hospital will take good care of them."

"It can be scary not knowing what's going to happen with the virus. Experts all over the world are working hard to find a vaccine and treatment. In Australia, we have good hospitals, doctors and nurses who can look after us if we get very sick."

"It's OK to be worried about catching coronavirus. I sometimes worry too. Some people are only getting minor symptoms like what you get when you have a cold. If you need some good information, we can check the health department website together."

"It's disappointing you can't go to the footy this weekend. But scientists and doctors say that this will help stop the spread of coronavirus, so this is how we can help. Let's watch the footy on TV together."



Encourage your pre-teen to have a routine during school cancellation/closure

Help your pre-teen make the connection between current events and school cancellation/closure. Ask what their plans are. Discuss how they can have a balanced range of activities each day; give them choices. Be sure to encourage and check in with them to help them stay motivated. Having a consistent routine can provide a source of certainty about the plans for the day.

Supervise screen-use

Relaxed screen-time rules are almost inevitable under these circumstances, especially if your pre-teen's school is operating on a distance learning model. It is likely that young people will be using screens more often over the coming weeks/months, e.g. phones, tablets, laptops, gaming consoles and the internet. Involve them in setting limits on screen use. Ensure appropriate content filters are active – the government [eSafety](#) website offers guidance on setting up parental control.

Help or allow your pre-teen to get creative with how they interact and stay connected with their friends and loved ones

For pre-teens who enjoy spending time with their friends or are close to their grandparents, not being in contact with them for some time might be upsetting. Is it possible for them to talk to their friends/grandparents on the phone? Perhaps establish a group WhatsApp or FaceTime call? Perhaps they could write letters to each other. Can they post a message or send a text to share something they are grateful for? Find a buddy, or group of buddies, to set daily challenges to keep a healthy habit, complete a set of schoolwork, or start a creative pursuit? Can they do a virtual birthday celebration? Platforms such as [Google Hangouts](#) and [Zoom](#) allow children to have virtual group hangouts, so there are still ways to remain connected to others to stave off loneliness.

Keep an eye out for emotional or behavioural concerns

If you notice your pre-teen is showing regressive behaviours (e.g., displaying behaviours they have previously outgrown, such as whining, thumb sucking, temper tantrums), repeatedly asking similar questions or seeking reassurance, increasingly withdrawing themselves from the family or events or is engaging with excessive handwashing, make time to talk with them and find out what's happening for them. It might be helpful to seek professional support. Ask your family GP to recommend mental health professionals who have experience working with young people struggling with mood and/or anxiety. Many mental health providers have the capacity to provide services via "telehealth" (i.e., therapy provided by telephone or an online platform) when in-person social contact must be restricted. If your pre-teen already sees someone for mental health support, it will be worthwhile to check in with them. Some healthcare services that are usually easy to reach may be hard to access during this time, so persist, try a few different options, until you get the support you need.



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Keep looking forward

It may not feel like it, but 'this too shall pass'. It is important to have confidence that things will improve, and to convey this confidence to your pre-teen that people will recover, and things will get back to normal. Show your pre-teen how we can each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.

Where to go for help if you or your child are feeling anxious

If you or your child are feeling stressed or worried about the coronavirus (COVID-19), seek help. Speak to your GP or contact any of these organisations:

- [Beyond Blue](#) offers mental-health counselling 24 hours a day on 1300 22 4636. You can also speak to someone via online chat (3pm to 12am, 7 days a week).
- Young people (up to age 25) can call [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 55 1800 to speak with a counsellor, 24 hours a day. Online chat is also available 24/7.
- Call [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14 to speak with a trained mental health supporter, 24 hours a day. [Online chat](#) is available between 7pm and midnight (AEST), 7 days a week. You can also **text** 0477 13 11 14 between 6pm and midnight (AEST), 7 days a week.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- Use the Australian Psychological Society '[Find a Psychologist](#)' service. Go to or call 1800 333 497
- Ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

What to do if a family member has symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)

If a family member has the symptoms above and you're concerned, here's what to do:

1. Phone the [Coronavirus Health Information Line on 1800 020 080 or Healthdirect on 1800 022 222](#).
2. Describe the symptoms, plus anything else that makes you think your loved one might have coronavirus (COVID-19) – for example, overseas travel or possible contact with an infected person.
3. Follow the advice you're given. This includes advice about staying at home, or taking precautions if you're told to send your family member to the GP, a local hospital or a screening clinic.

If you're told to visit your GP, make sure to phone ahead and tell the GP clinic about your coronavirus concerns. Some GPs might be able set up a consultation by phone or video.

If you're told to visit a hospital or screening clinic (which might be located at a hospital), check your state or territory health department website for locations.



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Additional resources for pre-teens

Information

- [Kid's guide to the new coronavirus](#) (under 13 years)
- [KidsHealth: What kids can do](#)
- [Kids Helpline: Information on the coronavirus and mental health](#) (10-14 years)
- Short video with activities and games on the [Coronavirus](#) and [other health topics](#) by BrainPOP (up to 14 years).

Helplines

- [Kids Helpline](#) (5-25 years): 1800 55 1800, 24/7, free
- [ehedspace](#) (12-25 years): 1800 650 890, 9am – 1am (AEST), 7 days a week, free

Additional resources for parents

Information

- [Schooltv Coronavirus: a guide for parents \(video by Dr Michael Carr-Greg\)](#)
- [Raising Children Network Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) guide](#)
- [WHO Myth busters about COVID-19](#)
- [UNICEF How to protect yourself and your children](#)
- [Australian health advice on the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [DSS: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information and support](#)

Helplines

Refer to [Useful links in our Parenting Resilient Kids website](#)

Sources: [UNICEF Australia](#) [Raising Children Network](#) [The Australian Psychological Society](#) [National Association of School Psychologists](#) [The Child Mind Institute](#)