



# Supporting parents and carers to respond to children's needs during the pandemic

## Practice tips for Service Providers

This Practice Tip gives you advice about support parents and carers may need to respond to their child during this challenging time. It can be used to assist conversations with children, young people and families and case planning – whether this be a family action plan for change or an OOHC case plan.

This advice should be read alongside other COVID-19 practice tips that relate to:

- risk issues that the child or family may be experiencing for [restorations](#)
- [talking to children and families about coronavirus](#).

Changes to day-to-day activities as a result of COVID-19 are impacting on all families. For many of the families we work with - whether the child or young person is in the care of their parents or a carer, this time may bring increased stress and worry.

Parents and carers may feel worried that their family will get sick or may face financial hardship or they may feel generally overwhelmed and stressed by the current circumstances they are dealing with. Parents and carers may no longer experience the periods of respite that they have become used to while the child is at school or in child care. They may be trying to find ways to help their child learn from home, while possibly caring for other family members. Children and young people will be isolated from normal supports and routines. Children who have experienced trauma may find changes to their routines and relationships unsettling and may in turn resist these feelings through their behaviours. Your support can help them through this challenging time.

### Understand where the family are at

Changes to the child and family's life as a result of coronavirus is a significant change in circumstances – including changes to supports, schooling, social activities, daily caring and family time.

It is important to consider the impact on each child and family you are working with and decide if their family action plan for change, or OOHC case plan, needs to be reviewed as a result.

Consider this impact by connecting with the child and parent or carer to:

- understand how the daily life of the child and household has changed
- what worries they have
- what additional supports they may need.

### Talk with them about coronavirus

[Talk with them about what they can do to help to protect themselves and stop the spread of COVID-19.](#)

If they are worried that someone in their family has coronavirus let them know that they can phone their GP, or Healthdirect on 1800 022 222.

Tell them to call 000 if it is an emergency.

### Support them to talk to their child about coronavirus

Children may worry if they don't know what's happening. It is important that you, and their parent or carer, explain to them what coronavirus is, how to look after each other and what changes are likely to happen. Children as young as a toddler can be spoken with about these changes.

### Helpful tips for the parent or carer

Let them know to:



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- Give the child just enough information so that they understand. Try not to talk about coronavirus in front of your child in a lot of detail or in a way that might scare them.
- Let the child know that it is okay to feel worried. Focus on how you can stay healthy and happy as a family. Reassure them you are there for them.
- Let the child ask questions and respond honestly. Ask if they have questions or if they feel worried about anything.
- If the child is not going to see people important to them– like family, friends or Elders – explain why and work to set up ways they can stay in contact. Praise their efforts to be socially distant – “you are making a difference” type lines can be encouraging and sustaining.
- Limit how much media the child watches about COVID-19. Too much information about big events can overwhelm children.

### Helpful links

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

[Zero to three website](#) has some helpful ways to reply to toddlers questions.

[Behind the News](#) on the ABC has some child-friendly 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.

### Explore how they can look after themselves

It is important that caregivers look after themselves. When they are calm and supported it helps them to be there for their child and meet their needs. Build this into conversations and case planning.

Caring for a child 24/7, confined to home, with little external support is likely to be stressful and tiring. Having discussions about how this is impacting all household members can help identify risk and needs.

### Reassure them and show curiosity about how stress translates to their behaviour

It is important to normalise and validate their feelings of stress, worry or loneliness about the current situation.

Show interest in what they *do* when they experience those feelings and what impact that has on the child or the household.

Provide support numbers for afterhours – these are outlined below.

### Help them plan to stay connected to supports

Talk with them about who their supports are, what support they can give and how they can connect. Without a plan, it can be easy to go days without contact with people from outside their home. They need support and connection now more than ever.

### Ask what assistance could alleviate stressors

There may be practical or emotional supports that you can provide that will reduce the stressors for the parent or carer, which will in turn support them to be more responsive to the child.

### Explore how they can pay attention to their emotions



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Talk about strategies they can use to identify what they are feeling and help them to decide what they would like to do when uncomfortable feelings arise.

If they are uncomfortable or reluctant to talk about their feelings you could involve them in conversations with the child to explore the child's feelings. The parent or carer can often learn and engage alongside the child. Use bear cards or other activities to share this conversation.

### **Ask how they can connect with culture, spirituality or religion**

If cultural, spiritual or religious connection is usually something that is important to their mental wellbeing, explore how they can still access this in different ways.

### **Give them tips to support the child's schooling**

If a child's school needs to close, the school will communicate with families through its usual channels (this might be through email, SMS, websites).

If the child is going to be [learning from home](#), help the parent or carer to set up a learning environment. Encourage them to have a daily routine for the family. Break down the day into small parts to cover off:

- school subjects
- morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea
- time for play and to move their body.

[NSW Department of Education](#) website has helpful advice to support their child to learn at home. In addition, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation will broadcast educational shows and mini lessons on one of its children's channels from mid-April, with shows for primary students in the morning and high school content in the afternoon.

### **Help them to support their child's wellbeing**

Social distancing is likely to be a big change for the child. It is important to help the family navigate these changes and put plans in place to make sure the child's needs are still met.

### **Break plans into achievable parts**

Keep plans simple, manageable and realistic to this current social situation, while considering what is essential to the child's needs. Parents and carers may feel overwhelmed caring for their child full time without child care or managing the child's schooling in addition to their usual responsibilities.

### **Talk with them about having small, special moments with their child**

Explain the importance and power of having small daily connections with their child, where they tune in to their child. Serve and return is a helpful concept to use - adapt the examples to the age and stage of the child.

### **Help them to support the child to deal with change**

It is important to keep children in the loop about changes, even those who are very young. Let them ask questions. Wherever possible, support the parent or carer to let them have a say in some of the changes, for example – how would they like to stay connected to family or friends?

When children experience a change to their routines they may be confused or upset. Some children will not be able to tell their caregivers with words that they are worried or upset. They may share their feelings through their behaviour like acting out, seeking additional attention, or be hard to settle or withdraw.



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It can be easy for caregivers to feel frustrated when this happens. If their child's behaviour changes, help them to think:

'What are they trying to tell me?'

'How can I respond to them in a way that will meet that need?'

Develop some simple strategies to help the parent or carer to respond to these behaviours and who to access to get support. This may be to phone you or another support; or to call Parentline who provide phone counselling and parenting advice or My Forever Family NSW for carers.

### **Support them to keep the child connected to friends and family**

There are lots of creative ways that they can support their child to stay connected to friends, brothers, sisters, parents, cousins, grandparents, mob and other important people.

Ideas include:

- video services apps and sites, including group video hangouts
- phone calls or phone messages
- photo sharing apps
- family music playlists to share songs with each other
- gaming apps that could support friends or siblings to play computer games together
- letter-writing: build this into the child's routine and send letters and craft in the post.

Teenagers are likely to find it particularly hard to be away from their friends. It is developmentally normal for teenagers to need peer interactions and support.

Validate their feelings of frustration, anger or worry.

Talk with them about ways that they can stay connected with their friends.

Plan something that they can look forward to doing with their friends after the restrictions are lifted.

If they are choosing to see their friends despite the restrictions, remind them about the risks to themselves, their friends and your household. Use a harm minimisation strategies to work with the young person.

### **Help them to develop a consistent routine**

Having a routine will help the family to adapt to change and feel more in control in these uncertain times. Reinforce to the family that they are doing the right thing; that they are making a difference to the safety and health of their community and let them know you appreciate their efforts.

### **Explore how to keep the child connected to nature**

Unless their doctor tells them not to, they can still go outdoors to your backyard and for walks as a family.

There are fun activities they can do as a family such as 'nature scavenger hunts' (search on the web for activity sheets). These are not essential, but may be helpful for families who want to keep their child busy.

### **Talk about how to keep the child's body active**

Being active is important for growing bodies and to keep bodies and minds healthy. Give some simple ideas to the parent or carer about how they can do this without it being overwhelming. There are lots of ideas online about how to do this during coronavirus.



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### Keep the child's creativity and mind busy

Give the parent or carer ideas about how to keep the child's mind and body busy while getting through the pandemic.

[ABC for Kids website](#) has a range of creative activities, podcasts and educational videos.

[Raising children website](#) gives helpful tips about play with children across different ages.

And here is a list of interesting sites that give virtual tours:

|                                 |   |                                  |
|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| • <a href="#">Access Mars</a>   | • <a href="#">Australian War Museum</a> | • <a href="#">British Museum</a> |
| • <a href="#">San Diego Zoo</a> | • <a href="#">Taronga Zoo</a>           |                                  |

### Contact support services

Almost all support services are still open, even if that means that their service is provided differently. Here are some helpful links to services:

[Tresillian](#) Advice and Tips for your Baby

[Karitane](#) information and resources for parents of toddlers

[Parent Line](#) provide telephone counselling, advice and referrals to parents and carers

[Beyond Blue Healthy Families page](#) provides information and resources for all aspects of family life

[Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation](#) have great information for teens and young adults.

[Carers Australia](#) provide information, support and resources for families and carers in the NDIS

[My Forever Family NSW](#) provides advocacy and support for carers

[AbSec](#) provides support to carers of Aboriginal children and young people.