

GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN

In “emergency” situations, when a serious critical event affects us, there is a highly emotional impact on the individual and the community. Victims of a traumatic event experience a disruption in their mental and emotional balance; they are on a constant alert that compromises the feeling of safety. Children and adults are well equipped to face difficult situations as long as they are appropriately supported.

Reactions to traumatic events can be numerous. There is not a right or wrong way of feeling and expressing sorrow and concern. In moments of danger, children need to refer to their caregivers; however, when the caregivers are exposed to the same event, children might notice and react to the arousal in adults, whom should reassure them. It is very important for adults to find psychological support and help in order to deal with their normal stress reactions and provide their children with the necessary emotional safety. When exposed to a dramatic event, children express their feelings in a different way from adults and according to the children’s age and development stage.

After being exposed to a chronic situation like the Coronavirus threat, children might feel different emotions: sadness, guilt, rage, fear, confusion and anxiety, also as a consequence of the prolonged isolation and the upset daily routine. They can also develop somatic reactions with physical symptoms (headache, stomach-ache...). There are strong individual differences in the manifestation, duration and intensity of these reactions. The processing process is subjective: it is possible that some children experience only one of these reactions, while others experience many of them at the same time, for one day or for a longer period.

Here are the most common reactions:

- **Stress often arises in the form of rage and irritability** that children might address to the people closest to them (parents, friends). Keep in mind that rage is a healthy feeling and can be expressed in an acceptable way.
- **Boredom can be linked to the effort of keeping up with the different pace of distance education activities.** Because of the pandemic, some countries had to close schools, children have to stay home and education activities have to take place online. Keep in mind that a radical change of environment can generate confusion and lead to struggling in following instructions. Reassure the children and explain them that these measures were suggested by experts in order to protect them.
- **Pain is expressed through behaviour.** According to the age, it is possible that children do not express verbally their worries. They can become irritable, have concentration problems, enact moments of the event they witnessed, draw images that recall what they heard about the infection. They can be afraid of things that did not scare them before or show behaviours that are typical of previous development stages: they go back to doing things they did in the past or play games they played when they were younger.

- **Difficulty in sleeping and/or eating.** Trouble falling asleep, frequent awakenings and nightmares, or hypersomnia, which means sleeping for many more hours).
- **Lack of energy.** Fatigue, difficulties in social interaction and tendency to self-isolation.
- **Need for more attention from parents or caregivers.** Children can struggle more to separate from caregivers because they are afraid something bad can happen to them or their relatives or that they might die.

These reactions are normal, especially when there are important changes in the everyday life and in the daily routine of a child.

WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH CHILDREN

- **Let children know that it is normal to be overwhelmed, scared or worried.** Explain that all the feelings are fine (normalisation and validation of reactions).
- **Do not deny what you are feeling, explain that it is normal** that also adults have emotional reactions after such an unexpected event and that all reactions are normal and manageable. Discomfort is created when suppressing emotions, not when they are expressed. This way, children will have a role model and will learn that they can trust you and tell you about their emotional states.
- **Do not say things like:** *“I know how you feel”*; *“It could be worse”*; *“Don’t think about it”*; *“You will be stronger thanks to this”*. These expressions that the adults use to reassure each other can interfere with showing emotions and painful feelings that are a consequence of the catastrophic event.
- **Tell the truth and stick to the facts.** Do not pretend that nothing is happening nor try to minimise it. Children are great observers and they will be worry more if they notice inconsistencies. Do not dwell on the size or the consequences of the Coronavirus situation, especially with little children.
- **Use simple words, appropriate to the children’s age,** do not over-expose them to traumatic details and leave a lot of room for questions. If you struggle on a question, take time by saying: *“Mum doesn’t know, she will look for more information and when she has it, she will tell you, ok?”*.
- **Show children that they are safe** now and that the other important adults in their life are too. Always give information sticking to reality and facts.
- **Remind them that there are trustworthy people that are taking care of fixing the consequences of the event** and that are working to make sure not to have any more problems like this (*“Did you see how many doctors are working? They are all very good people that know how to help adults and children that are in trouble”*).
- **Show openness try to talk with a reassuring voice.**
- **Let children talk about their feelings** and reassure them that even if the situation is bad, together you can deal with it. This way, it will be easier for you to check the emotional state they are in and help them in the most appropriate manner.
- **If children have angry outbursts, expressing the reasons of their anger with words** can help them gaining more control learning how to regulate it (*“Are you angry? Do you know that I am angry too?”*).



- **If children show feelings of guilt, it is important to reassure them that they are by no means involved in the events** (“*It is not your fault if...*”).
- **Restrict exposure to the media.** People affected by the Coronavirus threat need to find a meaning for what is happening and therefore spend a lot of time checking the news on TV, radio and the internet. It is important that children are never left alone while there are programmes related to the event. Do not forbid checking the news but choose a moment during the day or 10 minutes to do that together (selecting the news beforehand) and to explain to children what exactly is being said. Focus the attention on the most reassuring details (for instance, the doctors that are helping) and give children all the time they need to ask questions.
- **Keep the family routine as much as possible.** This is important because it is reassuring. Do not give too many presents or organise extra activities. Keeping the routine is the most natural and healthy thing you can do.

If you do not see any improvement in your children’s reactions, it is useful to address the problem to trained professionals, who can help.