

Talking to Students About COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

A Teacher and Parent Resource

A new type of coronavirus, abbreviated COVID-19, is causing an outbreak of respiratory (lung) disease. It was first detected in China and has now been detected internationally. While the immediate health risk in Australia is low, it is important to plan for any possible outbreaks if the risk level increases in the future.

Concern over this new virus can make students and their families anxious. While we don't know where and to what extent the disease may spread here in Australia, we do know that it is contagious, that the severity of illness can vary from individual to individual, and that there are steps we can take to prevent the spread of infection. Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping students cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

It is very important to remember that students will look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If Teachers and parents seem overly worried, student's anxiety may rise. Teachers and parents should reassure students that medical professionals and schools are working hard to ensure that people throughout the country stay healthy. However, students also need factual, developmentally appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instructions about how to avoid infections and spread of the disease. Teaching students' positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

Specific Guidelines

Remain calm and reassuring.

- Students will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your student's anxiety.
- If true, emphasize to your student that they and their family are fine.
- Remind them that you and the teachers at their school, and their parents are there to keep them safe and healthy.
- Let students talk about their feelings and help reframe their concerns into the appropriate perspective.

Make yourself available.

- Students may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions.
- It is important that they know they have someone who will listen to them; make time for them.
- For parents. tell them you love them and give them plenty of affection.

Avoid excessive blaming.

- When tensions are high, sometimes we try to blame someone.
- It is important to avoid stereotyping any one group of people as responsible for the virus.
- Bullying or negative comments made toward others should be stopped and reported to the school.
- Be aware of any comments that other adults are having. You may have to explain what comments mean if they are different than the values that you have at home or in the school.

Monitor television viewing and social media.

- Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet and through social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your student is present.
- Talk to students about how many stories about COVID-19 on the Internet may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.
- Talk to students about factual information of this disease—this can help reduce anxiety.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety—avoid this.
- Be aware that developmentally inappropriate information (i.e., information designed for adults) can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young students.

Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible.

- Keep to a regular schedule, as this can be reassuring and promotes physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- Encourage your students to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Be honest and accurate.

- In the absence of factual information, students often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment, very few people in this country are sick with COVID-19.
- Students can be told this disease is thought to be spread between people who are in close contact with one another—when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- It is also thought it can be spread when you touch an infected surface or object, which is why it is so important to protect yourself.
- For additional factual information check the [Queensland Department of Health Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) website or the [Australian Government Department of Health](#) website.

Know the symptoms of COVID-19.

These [symptoms](#) appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the disease or as long as 14 days after exposure:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Fatigue
- Shortness for breath

For some people the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life threatening. In either case it is important to follow instructions about staying home from school or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection.

Encourage students to practice every day good hygiene—simple steps to prevent spread of illness:

- Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star or Happy Birthday slowly takes about 20 seconds).
- Cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow. Do not share food or drinks.
- Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
- Giving students guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over disease spread and will help to reduce their anxiety.
- Encourage students to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off illness.

Discuss new rules or practices at school.

- Many schools already enforce illness prevention habits, including frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based (sanitizer) hand cleansers.
- Brisbane Catholic Education or your principal will send information home about any new rules or practices.

For parents- Communicate with your school.

- Let your school know if your child is sick and keep them home. Your school may ask if your student has a fever or not. This information will help the school to know why your student was kept home. If your child is diagnosed with COVID-19, let the school know so they can communicate with and get guidance from health and school authorities.
- Talk to the schools Guidance Counsellor if your child is having difficulties as a result of anxiety or stress related to COVID-19. They can give guidance and support to your student at school.
- *Make sure to follow all instructions from your school.*

Additional resources

Australian Government, Department of Health, Coronavirus (COVID19) information for schools, early childhood centers, students and parents: [An information sheet for schools and early childhood centres, students and parents about coronavirus \(COVID-19\).](#)

Scooltv.me special report: Coronavirus – a guide for parents https://scooltv.me/wellbeing_news/special-report-coronavirus

Just for Kids: A comic exploring the new coronavirus:
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

Coronavirus: A kid friendly explainer video from Brainpop.
<https://www.brainpop.com/health/diseasesinjuriesandconditions/coronavirus/>

Resource for Parents

Take time to talk to your Child

You know your child best. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them the information that health experts identify as critical to ensuring your child's health. Be patient; children and young people do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

When sharing information, it is important make sure to provide facts without promoting a high level of stress, remind children that adults are working to address this concern, and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

Information is rapidly changing about this new virus—to have the most correct information stay informed by accessing [the Queensland Department of Health Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) website or the [Australian](#)

[Government Department of Health](#) website.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

Early primary school students need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”

Upper primary school students will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.

Secondary school students can discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.

Not everyone will get the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. School and medical staff are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.

It is important that all children treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.

There are things you can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading the disease:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the bin.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds).
- If you don't have soap, use hand sanitizer (60–95% alcohol based).
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.