

Delta Mental Health during COVID-19

Part Three: Supporting children

It is difficult to avoid news of COVID-19, with it dominating our news and media cycle 24/7. How children react to challenges can be different from adults, and different from child to child. They may have a heightened level of worry, and those who are usually more anxious may become pre-occupied with becoming sick, handwashing or avoiding usual activities.

It is important that we provide children with clear and accurate information that is both age appropriate and delivered in a calm and measured way. Parents and caregivers know their children best and are well placed to know what will be reassuring and helpful. To offer support, here are some extra tips and ideas:

Provide reassurance

Let children know that there are many people working hard in the health industry to keep them, and everyone, safe. Keep the tone of the conversation calm, hopeful and fact-focused – “we will get through this together”. Children can sense our anxiety and fear which will likely increase their worry. Let them know that information around COVID-19 is evolving and that you may not have all the answers. Being available and open to chat is what matters most.

Ask them to let you know what they have heard and how they are feeling

This will allow you to address any fears and correct misinformation. Check in with them often. Additionally, it may be helpful to reassure them that children are experiencing milder symptoms than others and that being healthy reduces the risk of becoming sick.

Focus on things they can do to minimise infection

Provide them with information on what they can do to stay safe. Teach them how to wash hands properly and make it fun! You could encourage them to sing their favourite song when washing hands. Talk to them about practicing good hygiene.

Minimise TV, radio, newspaper and social media coverage where possible

Constant viewing or listening to reports around COVID-19 may cause confusion, increase unnecessary exposure to details and subsequently increase worries, anxiety and fear. Ensure you are relaying information from reliable sources, such as the Ministry of Health.

Increase self-care activities for the whole family

Plan extra self-care activities for the family and maintain your regular home routine, especially if there is increased home time associated with social distancing or self-isolation. Routine helps children feel safe and secure, and provides opportunities to engage in positive coping and distraction.

Watch out for signs of change

This may include:

- Increasing or escalating reactions,
- Reactions that are not resolving with time,
- Behaviours that are worrying or concerning you,
- Intense emotions that are difficult to comfort or settle, or
- Changes in sleep and appetite.