

Coronavirus and UK schools closures: Support and advice for schools and parents/carers Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) British Psychological Society (BPS)

This advice was produced in response to the UK Government's announcement of school closures as part of the response to Coronavirus. As the situation continues to develop, guidance may be updated as further details emerge.

STRESS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Being out of school for an indeterminate length of time, with reduced access to outdoor play facilities and social spaces is likely to be difficult for many children. For families living in overcrowded conditions this will add to the stresses of daily life considerably. Families living in close proximity for extended periods are likely to find this to be stressful.

Adults will need to be aware of their stress responses, and also able to recognise how children and young people are exhibiting signs of stress. Signs of stress will vary for every child. Some children may verbalise their worries, others may withdraw in to themselves, others may engage in challenging behaviours.

Some children and young people, particularly those who are older, may be able to self-manage their stress, but this is more difficult for younger children. Adults will need to help younger children to understand and label their emotions, and help them to do things that will reduce their stress level. Exercise, art, drama, music and other creative activities are good choices.

It's good to talk, the DECP have published advice on how to talk to children about coronavirus. Our advice was summarised as:

- Be truthful but remember your child's age.
- Allow children to ask questions.
- Try to manage your own worries.
- Give practical guidance e.g. how to wash your hands.

ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

- Don't try to replicate a full school timetable – It won't be possible to replicate a full school timetable for a variety of reasons. Giving yourself and your children permission to accept this can be a big weight lifted.
- Expect stress – This is an uncertain and unpredictable situation, stress and anxiety are normal.
- Reassure children – Children can sometimes believe they are responsible for things that are clearly beyond their control. Reassure children that it is the adult's job to make sure things are OK and to keep them safe.
- Help children stay connected to their friends – Friendships are a key resiliency factor for children and young people. Most children see their friends nearly every day of the week and so not being in contact with them for some time might be upsetting. Is it possible for children to talk to their friends on the phone? Perhaps establish a group Skype or WhatsApp call? Perhaps they could write letters to each other.

- Normalise the experience – Normalising the experience is likely to reduce anxiety for many children. Reassure children that lots of adults and other children are in the same situation.
- Have a routine and structure – Having a plan and a predictable routine for the day can be very reassuring. As adults we like to know what is going to happen, and children like this too. A consistent routine lets everyone be secure about the plans for the day. It is often useful to involve children in creating this routine, so that they feel part of the plan, rather than the plan being imposed on them. You could display the routine using a timeline, or maybe pictures and visuals. Encourage children to develop independence by referring to their own routine/plan themselves.
- Don't worry if the routine isn't perfect – Remember, this isn't a normal situation. If you find that planning and sticking to the routine is causing more stress, friction or conflict, then it's OK to be more 'free-flow'. Perhaps be guided by the activities that children want to do.
- Avoid putting too much pressure on academic work – Most parents and carers aren't teachers and so it's OK not to be doing 'school work' for six hours a day. It might be more important to be spending time together, building relationships, enjoying shared activities and reassuring children, as opposed to replicating the school timetable.
- Try to keep work in one place – If children are doing school work or project work at home, try to keep it all in one place so that it doesn't spread out over the house. This can help to maintain a work/home boundary. We know that people live in different circumstances that might mean this isn't always possible, so perhaps there might be other ways to 'signal' the end of working e.g. putting away the work and then enjoying a favourite song or shared dance!
- Reduce access to rolling news – It is important to keep up to date with new developments and announcements, but it can be hard to switch off from the constant stream of news from media outlets and social media. Reduce the time spent hearing, reading or watching news – at the moment it might be overwhelming for adults and children. Try to protect children from distressing media coverage.
- Supervise children with screens – It is likely that children and young people will be using screens more often over the coming weeks e.g. phones, tablets, gaming consoles and the internet. If this is the case make sure they are supervised. Ensure appropriate content filters are active – the UK Safer Internet Centre offers guidance on setting up parental control. Try to ensure all children have a balanced range of activities each day. Involve children and young people in these discussions so that they feel part of the plan.
- Play – Play is fundamental to children's wellbeing and development – children of all ages! It's also a great way to reduce stress in adults.