

Talking to Young People about Corona Virus (COVID-19)- Phase One - Bewilderment and Fear

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The role of parents and adults in talking to young people through this time is crucial.

As the situation progresses the types of challenges we will face will change as will the general reaction of most people. This most likely follow some fairly predictable stages.

I will release a series of statements over the weeks as I feel people generally have reached the next stage of coping with the virus. The conversations parents will need to have with their children will change as we go through this.

The general patterns of people's reactions have been identified from how populations responded at different stages to the influenza outbreaks of 1918-20 and 1957 in Singapore and the USA as well as SARS, HIV and bird flu (H5N1).

The current challenges to us all, heighten and amplify everyone's feelings. Young people and children will vary in their feelings some appearing to be relatively unconcerned while others are restless and sleepless. Let's consider ways to get through this first phase successfully.

The predominant feeling in this first phase will be one of bewilderment and panic driven by fear. At times you will feel you may be over-reacting, at others whether you are under-reacting. Uncertainty is common during this stage.

Conflicting messages about levels of risk will drive fear and we have already seen hoarding behaviours as people attempt to protect themselves from being impacted.

Clearly when a society has such a powerful reaction to an outbreak, the effects are transmitted to young people.

What young people may think

Fears of death are common at the best of times in middle childhood and are added to by the sometimes, morbid thoughts of teenagers. These are not the best of times.

This may bring an over-estimation of the likelihood of fatality in either themselves or other family members resulting in clinginess, checking on everyone's whereabouts or frantic distraction often through compulsively playing computer games.

Some others may become reckless as if being 'death-defying' will prove to themselves that they are stronger than this threat.

A few young people will be able to express their fears directly and be able to have conversations where risks can be appraised.

What young people may feel

Awareness of feelings will vary. Some will acutely sense fear and may experience disturbed sleep. Other will be 'out of sorts' and grumpy with little understanding that their feelings relate to changed circumstances.

What you may see

While some young people may initially see this as an enforced holiday with an opportunity to binge on their favourite computer games, other may be irritable and be atypically reactive to disruptions and changes. How young people deal with fear varies.

Transition times in homes (bedtimes, mealtimes, getting up in the morning and stopping playing computer games) may be times for high friction. Slowly ease into these changes.

Handling the stress of being with your children possibly 24/7 is something I'll discuss in the paper on the next stage.

When the world feels uncontrollable some people become controlling. This can be of personal belongings, family member's comings and goings and siblings. This also explains why some young people will become so fixated on playing computer games. When the world feels uncontrollable, you go towards the things you can control.

Other children become more primitive. One sign of this is siblings demanding severe reprimands and punishments if their brothers or sisters engage in minor misdemeanours. When parents (wisely) do not comply, criticism will be hurled at them.

What you may consider doing

Be a cool and collected parent as much as you can. You may need to find a safe place for yourself at times where you can re-collect yourself. Sitting in your car, alone might be such a place.

Try to keep family routines as stable as possible. If you are spending more time with one another attempt to give family members as much space as they need. You may even consider develop a signal that indicates to others that you need some alone time.

Uncertainly about money, work stability, food availability and health status put pressure on us all. Plan as much as you can but don't turn these times into a catastrophe.

Having siblings spending too much time together is often a recipe for conflict.

This is not the time to overly restrict screen - time. Young people use devices to socialize and will need to do so over the next few weeks. Gaming is a good source of connection with others and also distraction.

Don't be at their beck and call all day long. This depends of course, on the age of your child but try to keep some times for yourself.

I recommend you do not when you enter a room to find a child or teen draped across a couch in idle bliss that your first greeting is to ask, 'haven't you got work to do?'

Don't binge on news updates. Use high quality sources to be well informed once a day, no more.

What you may consider saying to young people

These are uncertain times. We don't know how long this will last.

The best minds around the world are already working on vaccines and ways to prevent us getting sick.

This is awful but it is not the entire world and The way we feel now is not going to be the way we will always feel.

We will do everything we can to make sure you and our family are safe.

Even if one of us does get sick the risk of becoming seriously ill is low.

If they ask, 'will I die?' your best answer is 'no.'

The world has been through health challenges Like this before and come through and we will again.

Andrew's books, "*Tricky Teens*" and "*Tricky Kids*" (Bad Apple Press) may be useful during these times

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