HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH……CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) ANXIETY

COLLATED BY ISLINGTON CAMHS, MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TEAM

If the ongoing spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing anxiety, stress and uncertainty for grownups, imagine how our children feel! Depending on their age and media exposure, children may know more about the virus than grownups think and even if unaware, children still might sense tension and anxiety from adults around them.

1. Model a calm, measured approach.

    - Your children look to you for cues on how to respond to various situations. It can help to stop and think what message you are conveying with your actions. What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your children's anxiety. Taking reasonable hygiene precautions, not talking about excessively and carrying on confidently with your day is the best approach. If it is feeling hard to do this, perhaps seek help from other adults. One useful article to consider https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51873799
    - Parents who show good coping skills can help reassure kids that they are safe. After all, kids learn from their parents how to react in new situations.
    - Remember that kids make mistakes. If your child accidentally does not wash their hands or doesn't sneeze into their elbow, gently remind them. Scaring children with the potential consequences of their mistakes is not helpful.
    - Adults should model self-care behaviours: Maintain activities and sleep schedules. It's also helpful for grownups to limit their own media consumption around Coronavirus (COVID-19) and stick to a few trusted resources such as the NHS and Public Health outlets only once or twice in a day to prevent information overload and anxiety.

2. Listen.
    - It's important to really listen to your children about what they have heard, what they understand, and what questions they have. Sometimes it is hard to know how much our children have really been exposed to by the media, at school, and by their peers. Depending on their ages, children will understand information differently and if there are gaps in their knowledge, they may fill them in with the wrong information. Try to find a quiet, relaxed time to sit down with your children and really listen to what they know already. Validate their fears by saying something like, "It can be frightening when a new illness comes around that we don't know everything about.".
    - Some children may not be able to put words to their worries and may show you they are struggling through changes in their behaviour. Wondering aloud might help to open up the conversation… 'I wonder if all this talk of Corona virus is making you feel more stressed lately?'

3. Stick to age appropriate facts
    - Gently correct any misconceptions they may have heard and encourage them to continue to ask questions. An example resource to help younger children understand about the virus is https://matzav.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CoronaVirus-Slide-for-kids.pdf.pdf.pdf
    - Avoid having adult-level conversations about COVID-19 around younger children.
    - Answer questions with brief, developmentally appropriate explanations. For example, you might tell a young child, "Coronavirus is a new type of cold/flu, and so it is important for us to wash our hands more and sneeze in our elbows to keep healthy." Or we may say "We can keep ourselves safe by using good hygiene habits like washing hands for 20 seconds for soap and water. Very few kids have gotten sick from the novel coronavirus" If they are worried about elderly or ill family members, depending on the situation, it may be helpful for them to be able to call them or video link with them to see they are doing okay.
    - Remind children that doctors and other experts around the world are working hard to keep us safe and stop the virus. This can help kids understand that smart, capable people are taking action.

- When you don't know something, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I do know skilled people are working hard to find these things out as quickly as they can".

4. 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 children are present.

5. Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible.

- Keep to a regular schedule as far as possible, whilst following public health guidance, as this can be reassuring and promotes emotional and physical health.
- Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

6. Reassure kids by empowering them

- Giving children 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 your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off illness.
- Kids can also be included in other family-wide preparations. For example, if you were preparing for the possibility of being home for a while, ask the child what they might want to snack on or what activities they might enjoy during that time.

7. **Emphasise kindness**

- 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.
- As always, it is helpful to teach kids to continue to be kind to all people, regardless of their country of origin or their appearance. Kindness is always possible – even when they feel afraid.
- To help children more realistically assess risk, educate children that most people who visit the doctor or wear a mask probably don't have the virus.
- It is important to remind children that we are all trying our best to stay healthy and it's not anyone's fault if they do get sick.

8. Communicate with your school.

- Let your school know if your child is sick and keep them home. Your school may ask if your child has a fever or not. This information will help the school to know why your child was kept home. If your child is diagnosed with COVID-19, let the school know so they can communicate with and get guidance from local health authorities.
- Children are most often best supported at difficult times by familiar adults. However, if changes in a child or young person's sleep, appetite, interest in being with friends or leaving the house, or levels of reassurance seeking or excessive hand-washing are persisting and interfering with their everyday life it may be a sign more help is needed. Speak to your child's school or contact Islington's multi-agency Central Point of Access for all Social, Emotional and Mental Health referrals across Islington on 0207 527 7400.

Sources:

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