

Questions from Swindon SEND Families Voice

Q. How to explain the virus in a child-friendly way and/or to a child or young person with SEND?

There are a number of stories, social stories and videos that have been created to explain coronavirus and its impact on children and young people. These can be found free online. The following are a good sample for children of different ages, with different strengths and needs, and with different 'themes':

'What is the coronavirus?' - this is a very simply social story by Amanda McGuinness

<http://theautismeducator.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Corona-Virus-Free-Printable-Updated-2-The-Autism-Educator-.pdf>

'Simple coronavirus social story' - this is another simply social story by STARS (Specialist Training in Autism and Raising Standards) and the link is the first in the list of resources.

<http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>

'Dave the Dog is worried about coronavirus' - this is a picture book written by a children's nurse about the general coronavirus situation.

<https://nursedottybooks.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/dave-the-dog-coronavirus-1-1.pdf>

This is a YouTube video described as a "coronavirus social story by an Autistic dad of autistic kids".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GNRc5RrV-I&fbclid=IwAR15ZMqDnHqp7vpuHapCY11kDkaFJOPaJUJBmHHBlvrnfQiA97Mkrshu3k>

'Our school is closing for a while' - this is a social story by ELSA Support (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant). It talks about why school is closed and what you can do at home instead.

https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/School-is-closing.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2HfaQor0iDGRz86oXpBMrDnOO90AEwMkyM2im_pIntPj1PGNlCkYkLB1U

'The Stay Home Superheroes' - this is a typed story (no pictures) that describes a little boy being a superhero by staying at home to solve the 'Big Problem' (it does not name coronavirus). Two versions can be downloaded: one that includes the boy's "mummy" and another that includes the boy's "special person".

https://www.sophiesstories.co.uk/stay-home-superheroes?fbclid=IwAR3-mOrwV25Mg53T6GSBPcTbb5gsA7Kgj3kkOXdw69gyMFLJdR_Dv_Qtl

The Carol Gray social stories website has a number of social stories with different focuses: 'Pandemics and the Coronavirus' is more descriptive and technical; 'Watching a Pandemic on Television' talks about what children may see on the TV, and the difference between reality and TV; and 'COVID 19- I Can Help!' focuses on the virus itself, e.g. it's size, and how children can help just by washing their hands.

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/pandemic-social-stories-direct-access/>

Q. How much sharing of information is too much? How do we stop doing long term damage to a child's mental health? What should we do when he/she hears things from friends which may be unhelpful?

The stories, social stories and videos available online (like those listed above) are useful for providing children with simple, appropriate and manageable information. In particular 'Dave the Dog is worried about coronavirus', 'COVID 19- I Can Help!', and 'Watching a Pandemic on Television' may be helpful where there are concerns around children being very worried, feeling helpless, or hearing/seeing too much adult content.

It is also important to reduce access to rolling news. Whilst it is important to keep up to date, it can be overwhelming for adults and children to have a constant stream of news from TV and social media. Try to protect children from distressing media coverage.

Help children stay connected to friends and family (e.g. through calls, video calls, writing letters). This is important so that they can see people they associate with their 'normal' lives, know they are okay, and know they are still going about their lives.

It's worth noting that children may include aspects of what is happening in their play, drawings, etc. It is quite usual for children to play out scary or unusual events, even though it can seem worrying. But children need to play through feelings, just as adults need to talk. If this becomes repetitive or distressing play, or a child seems unable to think about anything else, then they may need some help to play something different.

For children who are particularly worried, it may be useful to talk about and create a list, poster etc. of things they can control and things they cannot control. An example is included below (from 'Thrive Counseling', an American children's counselling service) – this is more oriented to older children and adults but may be good for ideas.



For children who are particularly worried, it may be helpful to create a simple 'Worry Plan', to help them discuss and write down a worry in a structured way:

Worry Plan

What is the worry?

How big is the worry? (1 = really really small, 10 = huge)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Who can help me with the worry?

What strategies will make the worry get smaller?

Q. What should I say to my child who understands why she is not in school but doesn't seem to understand the potential length of the situation?

Noticing and anticipating the parts of the day is the most basic way that children become aware of the passing of time. It can be hard for them to understand how far away things are in the past or future, e.g. that Christmas is 6 weeks away and not tomorrow even though people are talking about it! It helps to keep daily routines, and to talk about things that happen as part of this routine (e.g. reading, eating breakfast, brushing teeth) – talking about when they happen and using the words 'before', 'after', 'next', 'then', etc. Being involved with a familiar sequence of routines and schedules enhances children's time awareness of the present, past, and future.

It may be helpful to look at a calendar and talk about / show which day we are on now, which day was the last day at school, and days that things have happened on since. Talk about and look at events that are likely to happen whilst school is 'closed' – birthdays, Easter, spring and summer changes (e.g. plants growing, things becoming greener, the weather getting warmer). A weather calendar can also be used to mark the passing of days: marking the number of sunny, cloudy, rainy, days each week/month, or the time the sun comes up and goes down – this can help a child to observe the passing of longer periods of time.

Consider keeping a diary (using photos, drawings or writing) of each day (e.g. one thing that happened or the activities a child did). The fact that there are lots of blank pages to fill may help a child to understand the length of time.

Q. How do you help encourage children and young people to do school work at home when they are resistant to it?

The stories, social stories and videos available online (like those listed above) that explain the current situation around school closures may help a child understand that usually school = school work, but now home = some school work.

The British Psychological Society's Division of Educational and Child Psychology have provided an online resource paper for schools and parents titled, Coronavirus: Support and advice for schools and parents/carers. The following points will be most relevant and helpful:

- Don't try 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.
- 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!

Q. Are there any other top tips to help with keeping children and young people motivated and engaged at home?

- Be guided by your child's school. Check out the learning information on the school website or speak to your child's class teacher.
- Get your child to create their own learning timetable. They'll be more likely to stick to it.
- Keep the learning sessions in short bursts.
- Get creative. Get messy! Painting, water play or slime making will keep your child interested.
- Enjoy the garden or outdoor space if you have it. Get the kids involved in planting seeds. Give them their own space to grow their own veggies or flowers. Sunny window sills or courtyards are perfect if you don't have a garden. Younger children could do a scavenger hunt, go bug hunting or bird watch from the windows.
- If you don't have a garden, get outside if you can. Go for a walk, or a bike ride. Hula hooping, skipping, kicking a ball around, playing 'It' or hide and seek. Kids need 60 minutes activity each day. Or you could try these [10-minute shake-ups](#).
- Get them to write a diary each day. Even just a short paragraph. History in the making!
- Get them involved in the kitchen. Help making dinner or doing some baking, weighing and measuring are great maths skills.
- Write to a school friend or a family member they won't see for some time.
- [Join a parent forum](#) or set up a chat group with other mums and dads to share ideas and tips.
- Take a moment to enjoy quality family time. Dig out the board games and jigsaws. Scrabble, playing cards, even monopoly can all help sharpen learning skills.