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Supporting children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic

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How to talk and listen

It feels like there's shared global anxiety about Covid-19. How do we help our children and adolescents cope? The answer is complicated, and it depends on many things, not least of all their developmental age¹. Even more than age, context, control, and connection can impact their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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#### Context

Context is the story we have about the given and unchangeable external environment. We cannot take away the pandemic, but we can help shape the story of it and what it means for our youth. For older children and teenagers, we can also help to filter the sources they go to for information.

*Explore what the young person's context/story is:* We need to know how young people are thinking about the pandemic. Asking questions is essential. The most important question to ask is, "Do you have any questions about what's going on?" A question like this opens up a dialogue. It leaves room for young people to bring what's important to them into the conversation. Other queries that might be helpful include: What do you think about this thing that's happening right now? Do you know what the virus is called? How do you know that? Do you have any worries about the illness and what's happening? What do you think about not having any school? We can pose questions about the future. We can ask our children what will it be like to go back to school or what are they missing? You'll likely be surprised by the answer to many of these questions and be glad you started a dialogue. Try not to be judgmental about versions of the story that you feel to be misinformed. There's time to introduce factual sources of information. For now, it's just good to explore the young person's story of events.

*Adding factual information to the story:* Once we have listened, we can gently offer trusted, age-appropriate, sources of information that might be needed. [The Journal](#)<sup>2</sup> is an established online newspaper targeted toward a younger digital native audience, and it might appeal to adolescents more than a traditional news outlet. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer appeared on RTÉ Junior's News 2Day Programme to answer young people's questions, available on this [link](#)<sup>3</sup>.

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The HSE has produced [an instructional video](#)<sup>4</sup> on hand hygiene for children, as well as other [useful resources](#)<sup>5</sup>. A helpful tool to read through with younger children (under 7) is this [illustrated story](#)<sup>6</sup> created by Manuela Molina.

***Understanding the power of how we story our experiences:*** Researchers from Stanford University<sup>7</sup> tell us that how we story stress matters. They have looked at the power of transforming how we think about stress and our [mindset](#)<sup>8</sup> in times of adversity. They explain that when dealing with stress or anxiety, we need to acknowledge it, own it, and use the energy created by it to move towards positive goals. We can do this for our youth and ourselves. Young people, in particular, might benefit from a mindset approach to stress because of their developmental need for initiative, accomplishment, autonomy, and independence<sup>9</sup>. It's important to remember that anxiety is not necessarily a negative or 'wrong' emotional state to experience. It can be functional and adaptive and can be a genuine emotion to feel in a specific context. We do not need to save our youth from anxiety. Instead, we need to help them recognize, understand, and use it.

***Provide contextual relief:*** We can support children and adolescents by taking some responsibility for their exposure to media. We can try to direct them to alternative topics or activities. All of us need to limit our consumption of Covid-19 related media. For younger children, it is a good idea to limit or, if possible, completely restrict access to Covid-19 media stories.

***How our youth story the impacts of Covid-19 matters:*** We can help young people to have a more complex account of the pandemic. An account that has elements of hope and positivity can counter negativity soaked version of events. It's important to talk about life after the virus. Teenagers are at a crucial juncture in their lives, where they are building their identity and wondering who they will become in the future. The requirements of social distancing might feel like an intolerable breach in this path to being their true self and can make them feel incredibly frustrated. Talking about how their life will be and who they will be after the lockdown is helpful to keep their imagination working toward their identity development and self-interests. The [Best Possible Self Exercise](#)<sup>10</sup> can help adolescents structure their thinking around their future positive self. Research has demonstrated that this exercise is beneficial for helping us tap into a future positive time perspective. It is also an effective happiness boosting activity<sup>11</sup>.

For younger children who live very much in the moment, talking about life after the virus is a useful way to ground them and prepare them for return to childcare or school life. It is important to remind younger children about school life and get them to imagine themselves back into their regular routines. We all can benefit from, and talking positively about the future can be a welcome context break for everyone in the house.

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### Control

The young people in our lives will benefit from feeling an increase in the amount of choice and control. They will also enjoy opportunities to have concrete accomplishments. As a whole, we have less control over our environment at the moment, so it can be difficult as an adult to help our young people feel empowered. A lot of reported frustrations coming from parents and caregivers living with young people on lockdown relate to power struggles. Younger children are refusing to eat the foods they usually love. Teenagers are finding ways to skip online school or refusing to follow public health guidelines.

*The caregiver provides, the child decides:* Food refusal is a particularly emotive experience for everyone. Understand food refusal in younger children as a need to control, and relax some of our expectations around eating. Allow children to have some choice in their food consumption. Think of food consumption over a week instead of one meal at a time. Aim to get some kind of nutritional balance over a week. Allow dietary 'failures' to happen. It will help our child feel more grounded and in control.

One approach to feeding that might be helpful at this particular time is the Satter Division of Responsibility in [Feeding Model](#)<sup>12</sup>. This model isn't for every family or every child (it's essential to get professional advice if there are eating issues beyond adjusting to lockdown). In a household where eating has suddenly changed as a response to the covid-19 crisis, this model might be helpful. It has the advantage of giving the child choice and agency. The basic principle is that it is the caregiver's responsibility to present healthy food to the child, and it is the child's responsibility to choose to eat it.

The Division of Responsibility Model structure is something that can be helpful for other activities. Many interactions with younger children involve power struggles. Borrowing from the model, the basic idea is that the parent or caregiver provides, and the child decides. If we take the principles and apply them to general activities, the following things happen: the parent or caregiver takes leadership and provides the structure; the adult chooses the 'when' of the activity; the adult takes responsibility to source and provide materials for the activity and present these to the child. The adult leads the what, when, and where of the activity. The child decides how much and whether they engage or not. In practice, this looks like having a schedule for the day with set activities designed by the adult. The adult keeps the schedule and provides the toys or materials necessary for the various activities. This provides both structure to the time sequence of the day but also to the availability of materials/toys. Children can easily get overwhelmed and bored if they are given free reign and all the toys in the house to play with at once.

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**Information for young people by young people:** Some adolescents might be pushing back against public health guidelines. We can understand this as their way of trying to regain control over their environment. Arguing with them and trying to force compliance is unlikely to be effective. Young people tend not to listen to the older generation. They prefer to follow advice from peers and like to self direct in their search for information. Instead of lecturing at them, we might be better to direct them to content produced by young people for young people such as that provided by [SpunOut.ie](https://spunout.ie)<sup>13</sup>. The youth information website explains the need for [social distancing](#)<sup>14</sup> as well as offering links to supports to help young people with the challenges isolation poses.

**Structure:** Everyone will benefit from this some form of structure. The Department of Education has produced a useful document giving parents and caregivers tips on how to create a routine which you can find [here](#)<sup>15</sup>.

**Failure is a normal part of everyday life:** Tolerating failure is an essential part of feeling in control. Letting go is as much an element of control as holding tight. Rigidity and tension can indicate a fragility that is not in keeping with a sense of being in control. It's vital for us to 'roll with the punches' and allow everyone in the household to have ups and downs and small failures. Tolerating unpredictability and failures demonstrate a belief that things overall will be and are okay. Doing this helps everyone believe that the adults have everything under control.

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Connection

Connection in times of conflict and tension can be challenging to establish and maintain. Being cooped up in the house together and having little control over their environment can make young people very frustrated and can add to the household conflict.

Connect and redirect: Emotional connection is an essential first step if we want to turn down the amount of conflict in the house. Psychiatrist Dan Siegel¹⁶ talks about a strategy of '[connect and redirect](#)'¹⁷ when dealing with conflict. The basic principle is that we need to engage the young person in a way that calms their brain, making them receptive to redirection and away from reaction to frustration. An example of this might be when a teenager is getting angry and trying to go out of the house, and we need them to stay home. We need to try to connect with them.

We might try to make eye contact, reach out to touch them gently and say something that reflects their feelings and experience "I know you must be so frustrated. I'd love to go out and see my friends and get out of the house too". We show our young person that we have felt the feeling. Then we can gently redirect or suggest an alternative

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action. A redirection might be, “let’s see who’s online who can chat now”, or “okay maybe we can plan a sleepover when this is all over, let’s think about doing that.”

Modeling how to deal with big emotions – it’s okay not to be okay: Young people will benefit from adults modeling vulnerability and resilience in the face of collective anxiety. It is okay for our children to see us cry, be scared, not know the answer, get angry, get it wrong, or be overwhelmed. It permits them to express similar emotions. As adults, we usually model for our youth how to feel, tolerate, and flow through negative experiences. But sometimes, emotions will overcome us, and we will feel like we have lost control. At these times, we can show them that we can repair and maintain connection and hold each other in our pain and confusion.

What does it look like when we repair after emotions have overcome us? We acknowledge to ourselves that we have lost control. We try to respond to the feeling. Then we decide to change our behaviour to minimize the impact of it for the children and youth in our home. Sometimes this involves walking away from the situation, or consciously taking a breath and internally disconnecting from the triggering behavior or conversation. Our response might look different, depending on the issue. Things that you might need to say include “Okay, I’m feeling furious right now, I can’t turn it down, so I need to go out of the room for a little bit. It’s not your fault, so I don’t want to be angry in front of you”, or “I’m crying because I feel sad/scared/worried about X. It’s okay for people to feel like that. I will feel better in a while. Just let me cry for a bit. Don’t worry, it’s not your fault that I’m sad and you don’t have to fix this, I’ve got this”.

It’s a good idea to try to avoid saying things like “get out of my sight!” or “I just can’t deal with you right now, get out”. Rejecting phrases like these can leave children feeling a breach in connection and makes them feel unsafe and abandoned. The banishing action can elicit shame. As caregivers, we will sometimes say things like this. Forgive yourself and keep going; we all go off track sometimes. Most of the time, we will be able to feel grounded and regulate ourselves and be able to reconnect. Reconnection might be a hug, or an offer of a cup of tea, or a smile with eye contact. Repair and reconnection are always possible.

What counts as a connection? Connection during the pandemic includes social bonds facilitated electronically AND touch and psychical connection and comfort. Generally, younger children will need more physical support, and teenagers will need verbal comfort and reassurance as well as non-verbal reassurance.

Adolescents mostly rely on friends and people outside the family home for social support and sources of connection. They will need us to understand their need to engage online with friends. The current situation is a time to make exceptions about online activity and see screen time as social time. Remember that a lot of adolescents will use text over talk in their online communications. Don’t assume they are not communicating when you can’t hear them talking.

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Turning towards each other: Don't underestimate your value to your adolescent in terms of connection. They may not want to talk or sit with the rest of the family, but they will still look toward you for moments of stability, warmth, and reassurance. The best example of how to offer this comes from the [Gottman Institute](#)¹⁸. They write about emotional bids and turning towards or turning away from each other. A 'bid' is any attempt at reaching out toward us for attention, affirmation, or affection. In adolescents, these bids can be hard to recognize. It might be something like, "have you seen my tracksuit bottoms?" shouted at us from upstairs. Or "when's dinner?" It could be a negative behavior designed to get our attention, such as a huge sigh, or stomping around, or a slouching body. Often adolescents will try to engage adults by sharing content, an image, a story, or an idea. We can easily miss these bids for connection. Responding to 'bids' even when we cannot immediately fulfill the need or request is essential. It is the moment of contact and acknowledgment rather than actually fulfilling the request that is the critical piece. Watch out for moments when your adolescent or younger children bid for your positive attention and try to turn towards them. We can say things like, "Hey, sorry, I don't know where your tracksuit pants are, I can't help you look right now because I'm busy working, maybe try in the other cupboard". With a younger child, we might say, "yes, I would love to play with you! Hanging out with you is the best part of my day, let's make a time to play at lunchtime when I take a break from work!" Responding positively to bids from adolescents and younger children help fill up their 'Emotional Bank Accounts' - "*Any moment of positivity resonance that ripples through the brains and bodies of you and another can be health- and life-giving*"¹⁹.

Younger children may be seeking more physical contact and might be asking for a lot more reassurance than usual. It is their way of establishing a connection, but it can be draining on already stretched caregivers. If we can understand it as them communicating to a need for connection and reassurance, it can help us patiently respond in a way that is in tune with their needs. We can offer children more time and space for hugs and rough physical play that incorporates touch. A hug is a speedy and powerful way to respond to a bid for connection.

We can connect through play: Younger children will enjoy unstructured free-play or dramatic play (art, drama, dancing). This kind of free play helps children process big emotions while having great fun. The [Department of Children and Youth Affairs](#)²⁰ has produced a number of instructional leaflets and videos on play with children and how it can help during the pandemic. The Institute of Child Psychology in Canada recently posted on their [Facebook page](#)²¹ a reminder that children's play might have darker themes than usual at the moment. Their advice is not to be critical or shocked and allow children to play out these themes in their creative expression and play. We can connect in play by allowing children a judgment-free space and freedom to use their imaginations. Through play, we can connect with everyone in our household. We can include adolescents and give them some agency and responsibility. Ask them to help us think about what kind of board games or online games we can play as a family.

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Our children, our shared future: We have agency and freedom in how we think about and adapt to this situation. Sadly, this agency is not limitless. We need to acknowledge that we are all living in vastly different social contexts. Many of us are living in challenging circumstances - domestic violence, career responsibilities, financial strain, insecure housing, job insecurity, unemployment, and many other situations. These are real challenges that, as a community, we need to tackle. We cannot expect an individual parent or caregiver to *rise above* these situations alone. It has always taken a village to raise a child. In this time of incredible isolation, it is more important than ever before to remember that we have a shared political and social responsibility for the well being of our youth.

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