

COVID-19: A support guide for families of children with heart disease

Many people in our community are feeling worried about COVID-19. Children and families affected by heart disease may be feeling especially worried. There is support available for you and your family at the Heart Centre for Children. There are also simple things you can do to look after your emotional health. Here are some resources to help.

What can I do to feel less worried?

Get accurate information and advice

There is a lot of confusing and misleading information available, so it's important to stick to credible sources. The Heart Centre for Children website has information on COVID-19 for children with heart disease. Other credible information sources include:

- <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>
- <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Take breaks from media coverage

Constant exposure to lots of negative information can cause anxiety. While it is good to stay informed, try to find a balance. Take breaks from media coverage and give your mind a rest.

Keep a balanced perspective

When we are worried or stressed our minds often get stuck on the worst-case scenario. While it's normal to feel worried, try to keep things in perspective.

Remind yourself:

COVID-19 illness is usually mild and most people recover without specialised treatment. Children appear to be much less affected by COVID-19 than adults.

Ask yourself:

Am I underestimating my ability to cope? Sometimes thinking about how you would cope, even if the worst were to happen, can help you put things into perspective. Take some time to think about how you have coped with challenges in the past and the strengths you can draw on.

Stay connected

Feeling connected to others is an important part of being human. Social distancing and periods of self-isolation to manage the spread of COVID-19 are likely to disrupt our connections with others. Try to stay in touch with friends and family by telephone or online. Listening to music or a podcast might also help you feel connected with the community around you.

Stick to normal routines as much as possible

Most families are experiencing changes in their daily life as a result of COVID-19. Some parents may need to work from home, social or sporting events may be cancelled, and some children may be staying home from school. Having routines during times of stress can help your family (especially children) feel safe and secure. This might include keeping regular sleep routines, meal times, and family rules. Scheduling time for play and fun activities is just as important. Developing a schedule as a family can be a helpful way of creating a shared sense of predictability and structure. Increased time at home also provides more opportunities to do things together as a family. Here is an example of how families might make use of scheduling to provide a sense of routine:

Daily routine

Rise & shine

Breakfast, make your bed, brush teeth, get dressed

Outdoor time

family walk, outdoor play

Learning time

no electronics, reading, homework, journal

Creative time

drawing, Legos, crafts, cooking

Lunch

Home chores

Quiet time

reading, yoga, nap

Learning time

electronics OK, virtual zoo or museum tour, educational games

Outdoor time

family walk, outdoor play

Dinner time

Bath time

Reading time

Bedtime

Keep up healthy habits

Keeping healthy habits, such as getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising are always important for our emotional health, but even more so when under stress. Exercise reduces stress and tension. It also gives you energy and improves your mood.

Take time out for you

This is easier said than done, especially for parents! Taking time to recharge and do something you enjoy can lift your mood and energy levels during times of stress. This often helps you to be more available to your loved ones. Think about what you find fun and rewarding. This might include reading a book or magazine, calling a friend, soaking in the bathtub, or listening to music.

Talking with my child about COVID-19

Children absorb information from the world around them, including the news, social media, and conversations between the adults in their life. Children are sensitive to the emotions of those around them and pick up on feelings of stress and anxiety. Talking with your child about COVID-19 can help them to understand and cope with what is happening. Here are some suggestions:

Make time to talk

Try to find a time to talk where you won't be rushed or distracted and you can give your child your full attention. Choosing a time when your child is likely to feel most comfortable talking is also a good idea. This might be when you're driving together in the car, out on a walk, or during a meal.

Find out what your child already knows

It's important not to overwhelm children with information. A good place to start is to ask your child what they already know. This will allow you to clarify misunderstandings. Asking if they have any questions will help you get a sense of what they'd like to know and their biggest worries.

Keep it simple and honest

People often feel more worried if they don't understand what's happening. Give simple and honest information that your child can understand to help calm their fears.

Some tips:

- Use a calm and reassuring voice.
- Keep it brief, then pause - give your child time to ask questions.
- For younger children, simple information might include, *"Some people are getting sick with a germ. It makes them cough and have a fever. The doctors and hospitals are taking good care of them to help them feel better."*

- Give your child a sense of control by explaining what they can do to stay well, such as washing their hands. You can make this fun by singing a song together while washing.
- Avoid scary or unnecessary information (such as death rates).

Tune in to your child's feelings

Some children may feel upset, worried or fearful about COVID-19 and others may not. When talking with your child about COVID-19, ask how he or she is feeling. Take time to listen to the response. Some ways you can help:

- Listen to any fears or concerns your child might have.
- Let your child know that you understand and that it's ok to feel the way they do.
- Reassure your child that they are safe and that you are there to help and support them.
- Explore things that help your child to feel better. This might be physical comfort (like a hug), having time to talk with someone they trust, or doing fun activities.
- Provide opportunities for your child to express their feelings through drawing and play.

Monitor media exposure

Exposure to media coverage can increase worries. Try to be present with your child if they are watching, reading or listening to the news, so you are there to talk things through with them.

Where can I find extra support?

It is natural to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Remember there is support for you and your family. The Heart Centre for Children has a team of psychologists who are dedicated to supporting children with heart disease and their families. If you would like to talk to a member of our team, please call **(02) 9845 0088** (Mon-Fri: 9am-5pm). Please leave a message and we will return your call. This is a free service available to all children and families affected by childhood heart disease in NSW.

You can also speak with your GP about how to access extra support. Your GP may be able to provide a referral to a psychologist in your local area. If your GP provides a psychology referral, you may be eligible to receive a Medicare rebate. You may also be able to receive psychology services via telehealth (phone or video sessions) so you do not have to travel. Ask your GP for more information.

Helpful telephone numbers

Heart Centre for Children psychology team 8:30am-5pm, Monday to Friday	(02) 9845 0088
The Children's Hospital at Westmead social work team 8:30am-5pm, Monday to Friday	(02) 9845 2641 (02) 9845 2642
Beyond Blue 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	1300 224 636
Lifeline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	13 11 14
Mensline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	1300 789 978
Kids Helpline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	1800 55 1800
Family Violence Helpline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	1800 737 732
Relationships Australia 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday	1300 364 277

Useful websites

Beyond Blue

- www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak

Headspace

- <https://headspace.org.au/young-people/how-to-cope-with-stress-related-to-covid-19/>

Raising Children Network: Australian Parenting Website

- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia>

Australian Psychological Society

- <https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/news-and-media/Media-releases/2020/Coronavirus-psychologists-offer-advice-for-mainta>
- <https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/38073179-4701-48bd-afd9-988c560ee2f9/20APS-IS-COVID-19-P1.pdf>

Heartkids Australia

- <https://www.heartkids.org.au/whats-on/news/coronavirus-update>

NCTSN: Activities for children during social distancing

- <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents>

The Conversation: “How to talk to your kids about Coronavirus”

- <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-gandas-answers-to-7-questions-your-kids-may-have-about-the-pandemic-133576>

Sources: *Beyond Blue, Raising Children Network, Australian Psychological Society, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.*