

COVID- 19: Talking to children and young people about changes in contact. Managing anxiety, loss and difficult conversations

Guidelines for professionals and carers: March 2020

This is a difficult time for all. The children and young people you care for may be unsettled and anxious about changes in all areas of their life. They, and you, may not be able to use the coping strategies you normally use to get you through difficult times, this has happened so quickly you may not know what you can do that will work.

Children and young people are having to get used to not going to school, not seeing their friends and importantly for children in care, not being able to see family members face to face.

How do we help them with this loss? How do you as Social Workers and Foster Carers manage your feelings about this and what are the principles of a good conversation about what is happening?

Attached to this leaflet are useful guidelines drawn up by our local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) with lots of links to webpages that can help you think about talking to children and young people about COVID-19 and the impact on their life.

Alongside this, we thought it may be helpful to share some basic principles which may help you think about the conversations you need to have.

1. Be kind to yourself. These are hard conversations. Children and young people may have questions you don't know how to answer, they may have powerful feelings which will be directed at you. Sometimes you may feel like you have got it wrong other times as if you have really connected.
2. The thought of being off school might sound great but the reality of being trapped at home and not seeing family and friends (for everyone in the family) may lead to an increase in behavioural difficulties. This is normal and expected. Think about what you want to prioritise. Children/young people who have experienced developmental trauma may find that feelings of insecurity and vulnerability increase. Remember at such times what they most need is a connection with you; to feel love, care, comfort and security. You may need to give yourself permission to let go of a timetable of education and use this time to connect (e.g. bake, paint, game, read together, watch films, learn something new, snuggle under blankets).
3. Think about who is supporting you in both the conversations with the child/young person in your care and following indirect contact.
4. This is a process. You may need to repeat the same conversation many times in different ways.

5. Think about the developmental stage of your child/young person. How do they best understand information; do you need to write it down; would it help to draw it e.g. using a social story.
6. You know your child/young person. Think about how they signal when they are stressed. What helps/doesn't help at such times.
7. You know yourself. Are **you** able to talk about this "**right now**"? The child/young person in your care needs you to be open and calm to tolerate their distress (in whatever form) and provide emotional support (even when it feels like they are rejecting this). There may be times when you can't do this, that is OK, just wait for a time when you can.
8. Recognise that the child/young person you care for may show their feelings in many different ways. They may be irritable, angry, compliant, anxious. It is important to let them know that you notice and understand their feelings. You may need to help them make the link between feelings and behaviour e.g. "I think you are angry because you have not been able to see Mum, I wonder if you are feeling really worried about her".
9. It is important not to go straight to reassurance. "This will be just as good as seeing Mum". The child/young person needs you to understand their loss and confusion "This feels so different, it is not what you want". Share your feelings about what is happening e.g. "I am missing seeing my Mum too". Normalise the feelings of the child/young person in your care. This will help them understand and accept their own feelings.
10. Use the principles of PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) to help the child/young person feel understood and safe. Remember we may not be able to take away a child/young person's painful feelings, but we can journey with them.

Acceptance is about actively communicating to the child/young person that you accept the wishes, feelings, thoughts, urges, motives and perceptions that are underneath their outward behaviour. It is about accepting, without judgment or evaluation, his/her inner life. The child/young person's inner life simply *is*; it is not *right* or *wrong*

Curiosity is wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour for the child/young person "I wonder if....." "Maybe this was going on...."

Empathy lets the child/young person feel *the adult's* compassion for him/her. The adult is demonstrating that he or she knows how difficult an experience is for the child/young person.

11. What is indirect contact going to look like? Talk to the child/young person about what they want. Contact will often have been based around activities. Indirect contact based on verbal conversation may feel unfamiliar and awkward.
Prepare: have a list of ideas for things they may want to do online e.g. if you are having a video call; Can you do it at a mealtime? What may the

child/young person want to show their parent? Can they play a game together? Share YouTube clips?

12. How do you create safety in the home for them to have indirect contact? Where will they be? What is the best time to have it? How can you check in with them afterwards?