Books and activities for helping children to talk about death and other scary things

Books

These books are all designed for primary aged children. In times of stress, older children sometimes seek comfort in things that are meant for younger age groups, so don’t worry if your child is drawn to something that seems “too young” for them.

All of these books are available online.

The “Your Emotions” series by Brian Moses. These books look at a number of different emotions, including some that children may be feeling during the pandemic, such as fear, anger, worry and sadness. They include notes for parents and teachers together with ideas for further activities (for example helping children to write a poem about the things that scare them).

I Don’t Want to Wash My Hands by Tony Ross. This book will help to explain to very young children why it’s important to wash their hands, now more than ever.

Are You Sad, Little Bear? by Rachel Rivett. The little bear’s grandma has died and he is very sad, but his mother suggests he talks to his friends to learn about what saying goodbye means to them. This book explores the way that although someone has died we can still feel close to them – for example, even when Little Bear can’t see the moon, he learns that it is still shining somewhere else.

Bugs by Sam McBratney is a rhyming story that explains why some bugs are necessary for our health and wellbeing. A book that might help children overcome fears about germs and micro-organisms that they may be developing during the pandemic.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown. The book explores why people die (age, accidents, illness as well as in war or through suicide) in a sensitive and gentle way. It also looks at different ways of saying goodbye, and ways in which we can remember people who have died. There are a few Americanisms (such as “emergency room”) but the book will be easily accessible to UK children.

Why do I have to? by Laurie Levanthal-Belfer is a book aimed at older children with autism and Asperger Syndrome, explaining daily rules they may struggle to understand - things like putting on shoes, getting ready for school and wearing clothes they don’t like. It includes ideas for helping children find their own solutions to these problems and may be useful for families struggling to explain rules about isolation and social distancing.

Badger’s Parting Gifts by Susan Varley describes how Badger knows he is nearing death and helps to prepare his friends for the time when he is gone. Through sharing their memories and the things Badger taught them, they realise that he lives on through them.

I Miss You (a first look at death) by Pat Thomas. Written by a psychotherapist, this book answers children’s questions sensitively and gently and includes notes and guidance for adults on how to support children through bereavement and loss.
Further support and information

Children’s fears can be very real, even if they seem trivial or unlikely. It is important that adults do not dismiss these anxieties – instead, take them seriously and try to see things from a child’s perspective.

Many children will see and hear things that they only half-understand. Explanations in clear, simple language can reassure and soothe a child who may have formed the wrong idea about illness and risk. Asking children if they have anything they want to ask or know can help to open conversations that the child might otherwise feel too scared to start. There are many good sources of advice and information that are suitable to share with children:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround gives child-friendly updates on current affairs, including the current pandemic. It also offers support and guidance, and fun activities such as “Rate the Celebrity Teacher” or suggestions for songs to sing whilst handwashing.


https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/anna-freud-learning-network/coronavirus/ gives advice for families and young people about maintaining positive mental health and dealing with anxiety that may be caused by self-isolation and the lockdown. There is also a set of resources written by young people for young people.

Suggested activities for exploring children’s feelings

These are some ideas for opening and developing conversations with children and young people about the coronavirus pandemic:

Take your cue from positive news stories

News reports often conclude with positive stories, such as the recent “clap for the NHS”. Use these to highlight ways in which children can feel supported or that they can contribute to making a difference – for instance, discuss how by staying indoors they are helping the doctors and nurses, or how they are contributing to a fall in infection rates and wider availability of food.

Don’t be afraid to discuss difficult things

Children will have heard that people have been very ill and that some have died. Acknowledge the truth of this, but stress that the vast majority of people get better and are not ill for very long. Although there is some uncertainty about the figures, as a rule of thumb you can say that if 100 people caught the virus, 96 of them would get better. Many of those who do sadly die are likely to be very old or already ill with other things. Explain that scientists are learning more about the virus every day, and that we are lucky enough to have very good hospitals and medicine in this country.
The Three Islands

This is a good way to help children express their fears and worries. You will need a large piece of paper and some pens or pencils.

On the paper, ask the child to draw three islands. Label the first one “The Island of things I feel good about.”

Label the second island “The Island of things I am okay about sometimes.”

Label the third island “The Island of things that worry or scare me.”

The child can decorate their islands in any way they like. Many children like to surround the third island with sharks and fences, to keep the scary things safe and out of the way.

The child can then draw or write on each island to illustrate the things they want to express. You can give them some ideas:

- Things I feel good about – having more time at home with my dog, being able to Skype my friends
- Things I am okay about sometimes – we have lots of food but I get scared when I see big queues outside shops, not having maths but I miss my football club
- Things that worry or scare me – I am worried about my grandma, I am scared my dad will get the virus because he’s a nurse

This is a good way to help children express how they are feeling and to raise questions that they might not otherwise feel able to articulate. Adults can use the islands to gauge a child’s emotional state and to see if there are things that they can immediately offer reassurance about.

Once the pictures are finished, you can then draw bridges between the islands. These can be used to explore ways in which things can move to a better island:

- Drawing up a planned menu for the week so we don’t have to go shopping so often, finding ways to stay in touch with my club online
- Contacting grandma so she can explain how she is taking good care of herself, asking dad to describe how he has plenty of care and equipment at work

These ideas can then be put into a plan that the child can follow. This will help children feel more in control, and to help them feel that they are taking positive steps to make themselves feel better.

Revisit the islands every so often so the child can see how things change and improve.

The “back to normal” jar

Children may think that things will never get back to the way they were before the pandemic. They may also feel frustrated or sad about the things they are not able to do at the moment.

Every time a child (or adult!) thinks of something they’d like to be able to do, write it down and put the paper in a jar. When restrictions are eased, take one out every week and make arrangements to do what it says. Allow children to put in large things (“go on holiday”) as well as smaller ones (“go to the shop to buy some sweets.”) The whole family can make plans to do the bigger things together.