

## *Personal Tools for Parenting your Children and Teenagers during Covid-19*

2020 has been a challenging year for so many of us in Australia. While we gratefully watched the weather change and bring relief from the recent bushfire crisis, we have had little time to catch our breath before being asked to navigate a new challenging period with the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to help your children and teenagers make sense of what is happening, as it may feel like their whole world has been turned upside down as stricter social isolation requires us to change those behaviours which are patterns in our lives. This tool sheet will help equip you with some reminders of ways you can look after the mental health and wellbeing of children and teenagers. The most important tip is to remember – do not take anything your children or teenagers do or say personally. It is an expression of their anxiety, fear and feeling uncertain.

In this challenging period, there is no right or wrong. Children and teenagers experience similar feelings of confusion, fear and uncertainty to those you may yourself be feeling. Routine is a way for children and teenagers to cope in their daily lives, and no longer being able to follow their well-established routines will challenge their coping skills. Keep in mind that for children and teenagers, their friendships and relationships with peers are deeply tied to their sense of identity. Social distancing requirements may feel to them that friendships and opportunities for play and their lives are unfairly being taken away from them.

Children's responses will depend on their age and their understanding of what is happening. Their understanding comes from their parents or the people around them and from exposure to media. As a parent, it is important to keep calm and manage your own anxiety. If you overreact, catastrophise and can't cope, this will make your children and teenagers more anxious. Listen to your children, show empathy and correct any misunderstandings. Some children will directly ask about what is going on or tell you they are scared. It is important to remind yourself that your children's behaviour is their way of communicating with you as they often may not have the right words. Observe whether there has been a change in their usual behaviour.

During this time watch out for:

- Fussy eating
- Bad dreams or bedwetting
- Irritability, tantrums or crying
- Separation anxiety – especially at bedtime
- Regressive behaviour
- Intrusive memories
- Headaches or digestive issues
- Behavioural issues

These are normal and understandable responses to the constantly evolving and uncertain situation in which we find ourselves. Children are resilient, and many will recover over time as long as they feel reassured and safe. However, if their behaviour continues for longer than 6 weeks, you may wish to seek professional advice, ideally someone with experience in working with children. Seek assistance straight away if your child is self-harming or talking about suicide. Distress can be detected in how children draw or play games, or you might hear unguarded comments which express their feelings. Being aware of changes in behaviour, and preparing what to say in advance can lessen this.



When talking to your teenagers, they may not like to speak or be communicative with you as their parent or carer. Do not take this personally. Teenagers often seek support from their peers on social media. However, social media exposure can increase their emotional distress as they are exposed to a substantially larger amount of content that can trigger strong emotions. The inability to spend time with friends in social activities will require your teenagers to adapt their behaviours to current circumstances. Social distancing requirements will feel like their choices are being taken away. Give your teenager a sense of control over their lives and make small decisions, as this will allow them to feel less helpless. With teenagers, help them connect with connect friends, help them to generate ideas, to connect differently, give back to others and to help each other.

Here are some tips that can help your children and teenagers:

1. The best thing you can do as a parent or carer is to talk to them. Provide reassurance and give them words to describe their feelings. Provide facts appropriate to their age group. Keep it simple and factual. Making yourself available to talk is important – and it is just as important not to push them if they say they're OK. They will let you know when the time is right. Use language that is appropriate to their age and try and finish the conversation positively.
2. Establish a predictable structure and schedule to your child's or teen's life to help make the world seem more stable again. Routine is safe and reassuring.
3. Be aware that children will overhear your conversations and note your body language. If you can be calm around children, they will mirror your responses. Showing that you are confident about the family's future and talking about your safety together will be the strongest supportive messages you can share.
4. Be honest and tell them if you don't know the answers. Do not tell them well-meaning untruths to make them feel better or make promises you cannot keep as this will increase their belief that the world is unsafe, and they may lose their trust in you.
5. Encourage a healthy diet, as food, especially sugar and processed food does impact on mood. Mealtimes can be a time to talk and share concerns.
6. Encourage connection to their friends - make time for fun, play and do things together. You can strengthen your relationship by learning a new skill together. Continue any traditions or rituals you may have, such as watching family movies together. You can make things fun for each other - put some music on and dance, go for a walk, do some gardening.

If you have any specific questions or concerns, please contact AccessEAP on **1800 818 728** to book an appointment and speak with one of our experienced counsellors.

You can also provide your older children with access to additional support services that specialise in working with children and youths:

- Headspace [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)
- Reach out [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)
- Kids' helpline [www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au) Ph: 1800 55 1800

