

Supporting the emotional needs of students in response to COVID-19: suggestions for school staff and families

It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. What we say and do about the virus, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease a child's anxiety. If trusted adults seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise. We should reassure children that health and school officials are working hard to ensure that people in Manitoba stay healthy. A calm and supportive environment is important.

Concern over COVID -19 virus can make children and families anxious. While we don't know where and to what extent the disease may spread in Canada, we do know that it is contagious, that the severity of illness can vary from individual to individual, and that there are steps we can take to prevent the spread of infection.

Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

However, children also need factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. We can help reduce the anxiety children feel by

- teaching them positive preventive measures
- talking with them about their fears
- keeping to established schedules and routines as much as possible
- giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children (school staff and parents)

- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk about them.
- Not everyone will get the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. School and health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- It is important that we all treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- There are things you can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading the disease:
 - Stay home when you are sick.
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.

- Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds).
- If you don't have soap, use hand sanitizer (60–95% alcohol based).
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Consider the student's age

- Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”
- Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.
- Upper middle school and high school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.