

PSHE
Association



Discussing coronavirus (COVID-19)
with children and young people

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Introduction

Teaching about hygiene routines, how bacteria and viruses affect health and how to recognise ill-health, is part of the Health Education aspect of PSHE education at all key stages. Pupils may ask about coronavirus (COVID-19) while discussing these topics, or in response to media coverage.

We would normally advise that all learning in PSHE education is built into a planned programme, but there are times when we need to respond to unforeseen events to protect pupils' wellbeing. We therefore offer the following advice to help you plan for such discussions, and recommend drawing on the [NHS website](#) and [Public Health England's guidance for educational settings](#) for latest information.

This guidance should help you answer questions, structure discussion and extend pupils' understanding. Pick out what you feel is relevant for the age and readiness of your pupils and the current local and national picture relating to coronavirus.

The topic of coronavirus might create a variety of feelings, including curiosity, anxiety or fear. Children and young people can show their distress in a variety of ways (some are less obvious than others), so it is important not to make any assumptions about pupils' feelings or reactions.

As with any PSHE education lesson, it is essential to establish or reinforce ground rules for discussion when addressing this topic (see the relevant section in our [guidance on discussing controversial issues](#)).

Practical tips

Learning environment:

- ☑ Maintain a safe learning environment through agreed ground rules, whether the topic is covered through online learning, home learning or in schools. This includes 'distancing the learning' by not using the real experiences of pupils in the class (or people known to them) as examples.
- ☑ Offer reassurance and be mindful of those who may feel more anxious about coronavirus, for example those who are concerned for elderly or vulnerable relatives. Younger pupils may also feel especially anxious. Explain that following public health advice lowers risks of catching the virus, and that most people (especially children) who catch the virus do not experience serious symptoms.
- ☑ Encourage questions and answer them honestly. Young children are naturally curious and may be full of questions. Older pupils may welcome a safe environment in which to discuss coronavirus. Answering questions honestly in an age-appropriate way can help to allay fears and ensure that pupils are clear about separating facts about coronavirus from rumours or untruths.
- ☑ Some young people – such as those who feel particularly anxious about coronavirus and its societal impacts, or those who are concerned for relatives or friends – may not wish to discuss it in any more depth than is absolutely necessary and this should be respected. Providing the basic facts will help to keep them and others safe.

Following guidance:

- ☑ Keep up to date with government guidance. This is a fast-moving situation and advice will be amended according to how the situation changes.
- ☑ Emphasise (in an age appropriate way) the importance of following government advice. Frame this positively by explaining the benefits of social distancing in helping to keep the number of cases as low as possible, thereby protecting themselves and others – particularly the vulnerable – and limiting the burden on hospitals.
- ☑ Explain the necessity for self-isolation in response to the development of coronavirus symptoms in any family member, and the social responsibility to help protect vulnerable members of the community by staying at home in such circumstances.
- ☑ Teach or reinforce hygiene routines such as hand-washing technique and important times to carry out these routines – such as before leaving home, on arriving at school (where relevant), before eating and after using the toilet. Share guidance on hand washing such as that available from the NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/best-way-to-wash-your-hands/>
- ☑ Introduce or reinforce practices to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses, such as coughing or sneezing into a tissue, throwing it away and washing hands, or if a tissue is not available coughing or sneezing into their sleeve at the crook of the elbow.
- ☑ Emphasise the importance of avoiding touching the eyes, nose or mouth – especially with unwashed hands – and of not sharing cups or bottles.
- ☑ Explain that the government now recommends that we should avoid:
 - events or gatherings. Though cinemas and restaurants may be closed there are big concerns about people gathering on beaches, in parks etc. if the crowd density and numbers prohibit adequate social distancing .
 - unnecessary travel on public transport that isn't for some types of work or other essential activities.
 - inviting people into the home or visiting others in their homes, including friends and family (especially those who are over 70, are pregnant or have a long-term health condition, including weakened immune systems).
- ☑ Make the link between all of these measures and the impact they will have on controlling the disease. You could mention that these measures have proved effective in other countries in bringing the number of cases down, thereby making it easier for health services to treat the cases that end up requiring hospital treatment. These cases are thankfully in the minority but still have potential to put a big strain on the health system, so keeping numbers at a manageable level is vital.

Managing wellbeing:

- ☑ Discuss ways to support wellbeing, including managing anxiety and staying calm. This can include:

- signposting sources of support available in school (where appropriate) or online (e.g. Childline) should young people need to talk about their feelings.
- emphasising the importance of finding ways to feel positive through activities that are enjoyable.
- maintaining a healthy lifestyle through healthy eating habits, exercise and maintaining good sleep habits.
- limiting the amount of media coverage accessed as this can increase feelings of anxiety (and particularly if sources of information are unreliable).

Challenging misinformation and misconceptions:

- ☑ Address misconceptions that associate coronavirus with any particular group of people and signpost accurate sources of information such as the NHS or Public Health England.
- ☑ Challenge the spread of untruths or misinformation relating to coronavirus prevention, origins or treatment. The World Health Organisation has curated [‘myth busters’ advice](#) to help support this discussion.

It is important to avoid:

- ☒ Approaches to discussing or teaching topics related to coronavirus that could induce fear, or focus on a worst-case scenario. Scaring pupils can make it more difficult for them to engage with the discussion effectively and may cause unnecessary panic.
- ☒ Causing feelings of guilt or using blaming language regarding the transmission of coronavirus. Emphasis should be on guidance and routines to reduce transmission.
- ☒ Encouraging stereotypes or assumptions associated with coronavirus. Pupils need to understand that there is not a higher chance of catching it from people of any particular group, nationality, or race.

Discussion framework

A discussion about coronavirus could be broadly structured around the following three questions, taking into account the age and developmental stage of pupils:

What is happening now and what might happen next?

How can we support our own wellbeing?

How can we help to keep others safe?

Discussing the current situation and managing misinformation

It is important to help pupils separate the known facts – for example: ‘there are cases of coronavirus in the UK and worldwide’; ‘anyone can catch or transmit the virus and no one group of people is responsible for this outbreak’; ‘hygiene routines such as handwashing and following government guidance regarding social distancing can help to reduce the risk of catching or passing on coronavirus’ – from inaccurate information or speculative interpretations.

An age-appropriate approach:

- For pupils in key stage 1 and lower key stage 2 discuss the basic facts and safety information before moving the discussion to managing wellbeing.
- Exploring the difference between factual information, speculation and rumour is helpful in this respect for children in upper key stage 2 and above.
- From upper key stage 2, you could start by giving everyday examples of fact, speculation and rumour – things we know and things we can't be sure of – before moving on to what is happening in relation to coronavirus. You could also help children to recognise the language of fact, speculation and rumour.
- For pupils in key stage 3 onwards, you could make use of carefully selected articles or media images to stimulate and focus discussion. You could record their thoughts and questions before opening a wider discussion.

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Factual information

- The situation regarding coronavirus is changing rapidly and it can feel difficult to keep up with the latest developments. Factual information about coronavirus is usually corroborated or confirmed by a number of credible sources rather than just one. Sources of factual information on coronavirus that you may wish to in share with pupils include the [World Health Organisation](#); [Public Health England](#) and the [NHS](#).
- The basic facts about what viruses are and how coronavirus is spread may need to be explained to younger pupils. Reassure younger pupils that most cases of coronavirus are mild.
- You could also share age-appropriate, reliable news sources such as [Newsround](#) or sites for support such as [ChildLine](#).

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Speculation

- Speculation can be explained as people guessing or suggesting possible answers to a question or possible outcomes to a situation, without having enough information to be certain.
- Language used when a person is speculating could include: ***it would seem/would appear that...; we think...; it's very likely that...***
- Speculation may play an important part in discussing the situation, but only if it comes from informed, reputable and qualified sources.
- Speculation, even from these reputable sources, is at best an educated guess, and that a number of factors could result in a different outcome – for example finding a vaccine sooner than expected, or better ways of treating symptoms.

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Rumours

- Rumours are stories, in this case about coronavirus, that people pass on but which might not be true at all. It is important to be able to recognise the differences between factual

information, speculation and rumour, including online. Even if many people repeat the same information it does not make it true, even if it is being discussed by friends or family.

- Children and young people should check whether something they hear is from a reputable source before they decide to believe it or repeat it.
- Examples of language used when discussing rumours include: ‘apparently...’; ‘I heard that...’; ‘my mum’s friend says...’; ‘I saw it on TikTok/Instagram/my friends’ WhatsApp group/etc...’
- Younger pupils may see their parents, older siblings or other adults as sources of absolute authority. Emphasise the known facts about coronavirus, rather than commenting directly on – or being seen to be judging – a ‘**my mum says...**’ type comment.
- Rumours may develop into conspiracy theories, where collective imaginations construct increasingly unrealistic but often seductive explanations for events. It is therefore important to check whether any facts support a rumour, if we have **all** the available facts and if there are different interpretations of these facts.
- At times of anxiety people look for meaning; so people may make inappropriate connections and use incomplete facts to justify their conclusions.

Managing feelings regarding coronavirus

You could explore feelings by asking the following questions:

- How might people feel about what has happened or is happening?*
- How might people feel about what is going to happen in the future?*
- What actions can we take to help manage feelings such as anxiety or worry?*

Alternative questions for younger pupils might include:

- What can we do if we feel worried?*
- What could help someone with their worries?*

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Managing emotions

- Feeling worried about what might happen next is natural, but there are ways that this can be managed to help a person to stay calm.

Ways to manage emotions about coronavirus could include:

- talking about feelings with a trusted person.
- continuing to do enjoyable activities where possible.
- maintaining a healthy lifestyle through healthy eating habits, exercise and good sleep habits.
- limiting time spent watching or listening to news about coronavirus, if this is contributing to feelings of anxiety or worry.

- reading [ChildLine's](#) advice aimed at young people on managing feelings in relation to coronavirus.

Following guidance

Use the following questions to facilitate a discussion on how best to keep ourselves and others safe:

How can we avoid catching and spreading coronavirus?

What should someone do if they have symptoms of coronavirus?

For younger pupils ask:

How can we help keep ourselves and others safe?

How can we do to help stop the spread of the virus?

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Avoiding spread of coronavirus

Emphasise that individuals can take actions to help slow the spread of coronavirus by following [NHS](#) guidance (see 'Practical Tips' above).

Some pupils may find the NHS guidance distressing, for example if they are concerned that they will not be able to visit relatives. It is important to help them understand that these actions are to help keep themselves, their family and friends and the wider community safe and healthy. Explain that there are ways they can support family or friends who are at higher risk, for example by phoning or video-calling them regularly for a chat.

Key learning to draw out through discussion: Responding to symptoms

- If a person shows symptoms of coronavirus they should follow the current [guidance](#) to stay at home and ensure those they live with also self-isolate. These symptoms include:
 - A high temperature (or the chest and back feeling hot)
 - A new cough that happens repeatedly
- Should a person develop symptoms, they should remain calm, as there are other illnesses that have similar symptoms to coronavirus and most people who do catch coronavirus will only have mild symptoms.
- A person who lives with someone who has symptoms of coronavirus should stay at home as well, in line with the current guidance. Emphasise that this is in order to protect vulnerable groups in the community and to make sure that people stay healthy and safe.
- Pupils may worry about feeling 'cut off' if they have to stay at home for prolonged

periods, therefore discussing age-appropriate means of continuing social interaction can be helpful. This could include calling / video calling friends and family for a conversation or interacting with friends and family online.

Follow up

As the coronavirus outbreak progresses, pupils might experience a range of emotions and concerns. It is therefore worth having follow up discussions if needed, for example by providing a question box – or virtual alternative – for pupils to leave questions that may occur to them over time, and signposting sources of support.