How can I talk to my children about their worries?

Even though children in Australia may be at lower risk of serious harm from COVID-19, they are not immune to feeling anxious. We feel anxious or fearful when we predict something bad will happen and anxiety is a normal response. It plays an important role in our survival as it helps us respond to threat and take action.
At the moment, it is normal for children to feel some anxiety, and the way a child responds to the current situation depends partly on the way their parents/carers respond. It also depends on several other factors such as the unique qualities the child brings to the situation (eg their temperament, thinking styles etc). Parents/carers can do a number of things to optimise their child's response.

LISTEN
It is important to listen, acknowledge and normalise your child's experience. Provide opportunities for them to express their concerns. Try to find times to listen during the day rather than at bedtime when everyone is tired. It can be hard just to listen, but this may be all your child needs. Try not to dismiss their feelings or rush to reassure them, but instead, listen first.

AVOID EXCESSIVE REASSURANCE
Try not to use statements such as “Don’t worry”, “You’ll be okay” or “Nothing bad is going to happen” as this is not helpful, and you can’t truthfully guarantee that nothing bad will happen. Evidence shows that when parents/carers provide such reassurance, it sometimes makes children more anxious and prevents them from developing their own skills around thinking rationally, staying calm and learning that they will be okay. Instead of answering the questions, consider asking questions such as “What do you think you can do to help you worry less?” or “What do you think you can say to yourself to help you worry less?” For some children, their worry gets out of control because they have unrealistic thoughts about how likely it is that something bad is going to happen, so try to help them to think realistically. The media often focuses on negative outcomes, so consider limiting your exposure to the media and only use reliable sources.

FOCUS ON COURAGE
Another way to shape your child’s response is to focus your attention on the times they are able to be courageous or deal with their worry. Use what experts call ‘labelled praise’ or rewards to shape their behaviour by focusing on all the times they are courageous and rewarding the behaviour you want to see.

BE A CALM ROLE MODEL
Another strategy is to be a calm, coping role model. One of the most useful things we can do to help reduce our children’s worry is to be calm ourselves. Our children take cues from us about how to react, and they learn how to handle challenging situations by watching and listening to what we say. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a great opportunity to teach our children how to deal with stressful situations – as this will not be the only time in their life they experience a highly stressful situation. Think about what you want your child to learn from you, as showing your children how you positively handle your worry can be useful.

If your child is still being affected on a daily basis, it is recommended that you seek professional advice, perhaps speaking to your local doctor in the first instance. Services are still being provided (mostly using telehealth). At Macquarie’s Centre for Emotional Health, we are providing families with both face-to-face and online options with our Cool Kids programs (see links below).

COOLKIDS