



Breaking the News to Children and Young People When Someone is Seriously ill With Coronavirus (COVID-19)

We know that in these unsettled times children and young people may need additional support, information and reassurance and we know too that parents and carers may also need extra support and guidance. CHUMS will do everything in our power to help families through these challenging times.

The outbreak of COVID-19 means many aspects of children and families' lives have already changed. The news is full of talk about the virus and the effect it is having. Due to social isolating, many families are having to spend time apart when they would like to be together.

Many children will have questions and worries about the virus, but those who have experienced the death of someone important or who have an ill family member might be particularly worried.

We hope the following information about supporting these children will be helpful.

Telling a child someone is seriously ill

Telling a child or young person that someone in their lives is seriously ill, whether they have heart problems, cancer or coronavirus (COVID-19) can be a difficult conversation for parents and carers to face. Adults often feel they can protect children by not telling them, however our experience in supporting families has shown that it is much better to talk to children about the illness, whilst remembering the following:

- Be age appropriate
- Be sensitive
- Be truthful

Tell the children at your own pace

Adults may need time to experience and understand some of their own feelings and to have their own questions answered before they are ready to talk to their children.

We recognise that this can be a very difficult time for families; however it is important that children feel included.

How to tell children

- How you explain the illness will depend on the child's age and level of understanding. For younger children they may not be able to absorb much information and you may need to add as time goes on, whereas you may be able to tell older children everything you know immediately.
- Choose a time and environment which is quiet and calm and use simple language. Don't overwhelm very young children with too much information all at once. Be ready to answer their questions honestly over the next days, weeks or months. Remember fears and fantasy can be worse than the reality.
- It may be helpful to rehearse beforehand what you want to say as it can be hard to find the right words.
- Perhaps start by asking the child or young person what they think is happening, this will help you to know where to start.
- Tell them that you are very concerned about the person because they are so ill.
- Explain what the illness is and give it a name.
- Talk about the treatment and then a little about how the illness may progress.
- Doctors and nurses are doing everything they can to help their loved one to get better and we are all hoping he/she will be well again soon.
- Say so if you do not know. Children can cope with uncertainty better than with dishonest reassurance.
- Explain that worries about the person who is ill can make people at home behave differently. Adults and children may feel upset or grumpy at times. Remember to be kind to each other.

Children's reactions

- Children may become upset or angry or they may not seem to react at all. It may take a while for children to understand what they have been told, to express their emotions or ask questions.
- Children may feel confused and unsettled.
- Children often express difficult emotions through a change in their normal behaviour: withdrawn, tearful, sleep / eating changes, clingy, angry, anxious, headaches / tummy aches etc.

What can help

- Children may copy their behaviours and coping skills from the adults they live with.
- Accept and acknowledge children's fears. Help them to talk about any worries.
- Share your feelings together.
- Children are more likely to express themselves in art, play or actions. They may also ask the same questions frequently – be patient and answer in simple language.
- Drawing, painting, puppets, play people, books, poems, playdough, outside play - all these can help children to express their emotions, talk about their anxieties and release pent up energy. Be with them, play too.
- Ask the children what they need to feel safe and try to provide it. If you cannot, explain why.
- Ensure familiar and comforting things such as blanket, special toys etc. as these provide security.
- Try to maintain their established routines and allow them to continue previously enjoyed activities or interests should they want to.
- Help children to keep in touch with family and friends - this may be through WhatsApp or Facetime. Recognise that children may need increased support from their wider network.
- If they are unable to visit the person who is seriously ill, perhaps see if it would be possible to phone, send cards, drawings, record messages etc.
- Help children to feel useful and involved.
- Children need to know that they are loved and will always be taken care of. Regular one to one time with a parent or carer can give opportunities to have their questions answered, receive hugs and don't forget their need for fun and laughter.

As the illness progresses

- Continue talking with your child or young person.
- Children may be reluctant to ask questions and you may have to take the initiative.
- If there is no chance of recovery, remember honest information will help them the most, however hard this is. If things are not explained they may feel confused, insecure and alone with their fears.

- Make use of available books to explain about death and dying (please see booklist).
- If it is possible, allow the child the choice and opportunity to visit the person who is dying. Prepare them beforehand for any changes in the person's appearance and any medical equipment present. At this time of Coronavirus (COVID19) if this is not possible you could consider other ways such as phone, Facetime, recorded messages, video clips, cards, drawings or letters etc that may be shared by nursing staff.

Looking After Yourself Too

- You can only do your best
- Be kind to yourself
- Don't be afraid of asking for help

Support

CHUMS is still delivering all services, albeit we are now working remotely and conducting appointments, engagements and calls online or via telephone.

If you have any queries, please make contact via our usual email address: info@chums.uk.com
Our admin team will get back to you in due course.

All voicemails are still being picked up by our admin team, but please be aware this is not constantly monitored. All calls that are picked up will be answered in due course.

PLEASE NOTE: CHUMS is not an urgent response service, therefore, if you feel that a child or young person is at immediate risk to themselves or others, please contact your GP, A&E department or call NHS 111.



Mental Health and Emotional
Wellbeing Service for Children
and Young People

Bedfordshire

0330 0581 653

Peterborough

0330 0581 657

Huntingdon & Cambridgeshire

0330 0581 659

For on-line referrals visit:

www.chums.uk.com/refer