

Talking with children about the COVID-19 Delta variant

EMERGING MINDS

With the spread of the COVID-19 Delta variant across many parts of Australia – and the accompanying lockdowns, school closures and surge in detailed media coverage – many children may be anxious about what this means for them. How long will they have to be ‘learning from home’? When will they be able to see their friends again? Are they at increased risk of catching the Delta strain? When will they be able to get a vaccine?

Data shows that calls to the Kids Helpline have surged in recent months (Carey, 2021) as all Australian state and territory capitals (except Hobart) have experienced lockdowns. For parents and caregivers, how do we support our children’s mental health and wellbeing throughout these challenging times? Arming yourself with the facts is a good way of approaching these conversations, and helping to dispel children’s anxiety. The key messages here include the following (Harvard Medical School, 2021):

- The Delta variant of COVID-19 is more transmissible than other strains of the virus, which includes transmission to, from and between children.
- Most children who catch COVID-19 – including the Delta variant – exhibit no symptoms at all.
- Of the children who do become ill, most experience mild symptoms, such as low-grade fever, fatigue and cough.
- However, in rare cases, some children have had severe complications from catching any strain of COVID-19. This has included myocarditis and pericarditis (inflammation of the heart), and a condition called multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C) which can lead to life-threatening problems with the heart and other organs.



- The amount of virus found in infected children – their viral load – does not correlate with the severity of their symptoms: more viral load does not mean more severe symptoms.

Talking with children about protection from the Delta strain

In protecting children from the Delta variant – and in the messaging around reassuring them and dispelling their anxiety – the emphasis remains on prevention. School closures can be difficult for young children to understand – remote learning is challenging enough for children without being cut-off from their friends, their sports teams, their mentors, their sense of community ... But school closures remain a key strategy in preventing viral spread – particularly with the more contagious Delta strain. Closing schools is also partly a protective measure in response to our lack of knowledge about the long-term impacts of the Delta strain on children.

For younger children, it’s a good idea to limit ‘play dates’ to outside locations where you can maintain social distancing (e.g. bike rides, bushwalks, trips to the beach) – with families with whom you’ve regularly had contact throughout the pandemic. Keep up the hand-sanitising, too. If you don’t think it’s realistic that your children can follow these rules, then don’t do the play date, even if it is outdoors (Harvard Medical School, 2021).

Having age-appropriate conversations with children to explain these protocols and the reasoning behind them can be challenging. But empowering children with this knowledge – which might include asking them what they want to know – can help normalise their experience and demystify the impacts of the coronavirus. It can also help them manage their emotional responses to the pandemic, including working through feelings of anxiety.

What about vaccinations?

As of August 2021, plans for vaccinating Australian children over 12 years old are in motion, with vaccines currently approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in this age group, and children with specific medical conditions. Numerous developed countries around the world, including the US, Canada, Japan and many EU nations, are already administering vaccines to all children over 12.

From mid-August, South Australia will begin vaccine roll-out for everyone aged 16 years and over, with other Australian states to follow – but as yet, the TGA hasn't confirmed when vaccines will be available for those under 16 years of age.

Again, being clear with children on the realities and expected timelines around vaccination, through honest, age-appropriate conversations, can go a long way towards giving them a sense of control over their situation and helping them overcome any worries or feelings of insecurity about the Delta strain.

More information and support

For further information on supporting your child through the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, including helping them to recognise and manage their emotions, see [Helping children to cope with uncertainty during COVID-19](#).

[The Kids Helpline](#) – 1800 551 800 – is another valuable go-to support for children who are struggling to express and resolve their concerns.

References

Carey, A. (2021), *Calls to Kids Helpline surge*. Sydney: Sydney Morning Herald. [Available here](#).

Harvard Medical School. (2021). *Coronavirus outbreak and kids*. Cambridge: Harvard Health Publishing. [Available here](#).

