

The Impact of Coronavirus on Children and Young People who Were or Are in Care

Dr John Simmonds, CoramBAAF Director of Policy, Research and Development

Covid-19/coronavirus has created a major health crisis that impacts on every individual and family across the UK. It is not surprising that many of the immediate priorities focus on adults, whether those most at risk from the virus or more generally the public health measures that are intended to significantly reduce the risks of the virus being transmitted. Children are included in this. However, there also needs to be a specific focus on the impact on children when their parents or other members of their family, foster carers or adopters are having to respond to the crisis by making major adjustments to their lives. The impact that this has on them cannot be underestimated. When it comes to children and young people in care, or who have previously been looked after, these issues will be significantly amplified because of:

1. their experiences of high degrees of instability and insecurity in their lives;
2. the questions that they may have about what might happen to them – ‘Will I catch the virus and die?’, ‘Will you still look after me?’, ‘Is my mum or dad or brothers or sisters OK?’, ‘Is there going to be no more food, like when I came into care?’;
3. the potential for the uncertainty, anxiety and stress associated with the crisis to trigger previous traumatic memories and reactions;
4. the impact of the severe limitations to most forms of social contact which require establishing workable boundaries in the family, especially for teenagers;
5. their opportunities to spend time with family members or siblings whom they are not living with being limited to indirect contact that can safely be arranged through online and internet based communication;
6. while children in care are eligible to go to school, this is likely to significantly change what they were familiar with – the school they attended, the teachers they knew, their classmates and the daily routines.

How children specifically respond to any of this will be influenced by their age, history, current circumstances, and what they have come to understand about Covid-19 and the measures put into place. It may impact on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours in many ways, and this is likely to be a combination of the past and the “specific” present. There are a number of key issues to keep in mind:

1. Children and young people will have their own thoughts and feelings about what Covid-19 means to them.
2. It is helpful to find age-appropriate ways of communicating about the child or young person’s experiences – what they think and feel. For some, this may be through talking; for others, there will need to be more creative forms of communication such as play, the use of pictures or stories. There is a wide range of online materials that can be very helpful (see below).
3. When it is difficult to know what might be going on in a child’s mind, then it can be helpful to put this into words. There is no one right way of beginning or continuing these conversations or activities, but there is one overarching theme – not to allow silence to descend on these matters. Children need to know that they are not alone, that there is somebody whom they can turn to and who will actively, sensitively and thoughtfully respond to them. It is not helpful to falsely reassure them that everything will be OK, but it is helpful to convey to the child that there is an adult on their side

who will listen to them and hear their concerns. The materials identified below may be helpful in this.

Disclaimer

There is a wide range of materials that can be very helpful in exploring the issues of stress and trauma and responding to these in helpful ways. It is important in accessing these materials that care is exercised when it comes to looked after children. In directly using any of the materials listed below, this must be done in a responsible and appropriate way. That may include discussing specific issues of concern with relevant professionals, such as the child's social worker or the supervising social worker, to ensure that any approach is appropriate and is applicable.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (USA): has a range of information and materials that covers a wide variety of emergency situations.

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html>

The Department for Education has published a wide range of child-centred materials for schools about hygiene and related matters such as sleep that can be used in other settings.

<https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/schools>

The HelpGuide website has a helpful range of materials for adults dealing with the stress of trauma-related experiences.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/coronavirus-anxiety.htm>

The HelpGuide website has a helpful range of materials for children dealing with the stress of trauma-related experiences.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-children-cope-with-traumatic-stress.htm>

The Royal College of Psychiatrists website has a wide range of materials on trauma.

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/information-for-parents-and-carers/traumatic-stress-in-children-for-parents-and-carers>