

Guidance for BRC Support Line Staff working with Children and Young people during the Coronavirus Crisis.

Introduction

As part of your role on the telephone support line, you may be contacted by a child or young person. This guide has been written to assist you in your interactions with children and young people, and to help you manage your own reactions to this type of work.

Children are not miniature adults. They react and think differently to adults, and have specific needs related to their age, maturity and level of understanding. When exposed to a dramatic and unfamiliar event, such as the current Coronavirus pandemic, children and young people are likely to express their feelings in a different way to adults and may manifest their distress internally and/or externally. It is important to remember that the child's caregivers and others in their support network are also exposed to the same event, and therefore may be less available and undergoing their own emotional response to the crisis.

Prior to undertaking work with children and young people, ensure you are familiar with the BRC child protection policies and guidance on how to handle safeguarding concerns/risk. Be aware of presentations/disclosures that may warrant a referral for professional help or the involvement of other agencies. Be aware of your protocol for raising concern and know who you can access and how, in order to discuss any urgent concerns.

Possible Reactions Arising During the Coronavirus Pandemic in Children and Young People:

- Sadness
- Guilt
- Fear – may be specific or general – relating to self or others
- Worry
- Anger/rage
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Difficulty eating/sleeping
- Lack of energy
- Needing more attention from adults

- Separation anxiety
- Boredom
- Loneliness
- Reverting to 'younger' behaviour
- Somatic (medically unexplained) symptoms

These reactions are normal and may be a result of:

- Prolonged isolation
- Changed daily routine
- Changed daily environment
- Exposure to news and social media about the pandemic
- Illness in the family
- Stress within the family
- Uncertainty about the future

**Communicating with Children and Young People via Telephone Support
(Helpful Skills/Tips):**

CALMER is the psychosocial framework of the British Red Cross and seeks to enable those working with people in crisis to provide appropriate support, safely and helpfully, whilst protecting ourselves and others and helping to minimise personal stress.

CALMER cues us firstly to be calm and remain calm, so that we are better able to think, listen and respond appropriately. Just saying the word "CALMER" should help us do this; but it is also useful to repeat the word "calmly" before each stage, in order to remind us to remain calm throughout.

CALMER guides us through six sequential stages that are important in any interaction, whether face to face or offering support by telephone:

Consider

Acknowledge

Listen

Manage

Enable

Resource

We can apply these stages when supporting children and young people on the telephone support line.

Consider

- Risks to yourself and the person you are supporting
- Your own needs
- The needs of the child/young person

Acknowledge

- Introduce yourself, your role, and what will happen during the conversation.
- Use a calm, gentle and patient tone of voice – acknowledge they may be feeling anxious about the call.
- Be aware of the child's developmental stage and adjust your language accordingly. Use simple words, appropriate to the child's understanding. Do not overload with information.

Listen

- Let them know you are there to listen and will not judge them – all feelings/concerns are valid.
- Actively listen – build on what is being said and show interest – use words like “Go ahead, tell me more...”
- Use open-ended questions – “What, where, when, who...?”
- Be careful not to probe into details – allow the child to go at their own pace – be sensitive and respectful.
- Try not to jump in, or to cut the child off, or put words in their mouth, even if they are struggling to find the words – give them space to do so.
- Do not minimise the child's concerns.

Manage

- Repeat words and phrases back to the child so they know you are listening – use similar language to the child. Describe and reflect, rather than interpreting what they have said.

- Every now and then, reflect and summarise what the child has told you so far in the conversation. This shows that you have listened and that you are trying to understand. In addition, you are verifying if you have understood the information correctly. Having developed this understanding may help the child get ready for making plans. For example, you can say, “I would like to tell you what you have told me so I can make sure I have understood everything you have said?”
- Normalise – let the child know it’s normal to be overwhelmed, scared, worried, etc – that all reactions are understandable, acceptable and valid. You might say “Your reactions are very similar to other people’s in a similar situation, it is very common to feel this way.”
- Tell the truth and stick to facts if asked a direct question, ensuring you are familiar with the facts – be honest if you do not know the answer. Don’t rush into problem-solving or false reassurance in an attempt to make things better.
- If the child is distressed you could try to encourage them to focus on non-distressing things in their environment, or encourage them to use slow deep breathing and focus on this, perhaps counting breaths in and out with them or asking them if they can spot different colours in their surroundings, or if they can push their feet into the floor to ground themselves “like the roots of a tree.”
- It is ok to say “I don’t know the answer to that but there are lots of people who are working hard to keep everyone safe and healthy.”
- Reassure the child that they are in no way to blame for events, if they are expressing guilt.

Enable

- Ask about exposure to media (if appropriate) and encourage the young person to limit this and to watch with a parent/carer if possible. Point older children to reliable information sources such as Government or NHS websites.
- Enquire about the child’s routine (if appropriate) – encourage healthy routines and enjoyable activities where possible, eg. eating, sleeping, relaxation, creative activities, play, exercise.
- Facilitate choices wherever possible, whilst still appreciating the age of the child.

Resource

- Encourage the child to think about things they can do to feel safer and less worried once the call ends. Encourage the child to write these down, if appropriate.

- Enquire who else the child can talk to and encourage this – who is in their support network. You may need to signpost to websites such as NSPCC, Childline, Young Minds. You could ask if they want you to speak to a parent/caregiver on their behalf.

The Importance of Self-Care for You in your Role:

Possible Reactions Experienced by Support Staff:

- Feeling emotionally affected by what you have heard.
- Over-identifying with the child, either from your own experience or in relation to your own family/ children.
- Feeling you did not do enough or that you could not help/solve the problem.
- Your own fears/worries/personal circumstances regarding the situation, being brought to the fore.
- Feeling anxious about whether you met the child's needs/engaged with them.

Helpful Steps to take

Beforehand:

- Knowing your own limits of your expertise and competence and know when to refer someone for specialised help.
- Calming yourself by being mentally prepared before you take the call.
- Having the number of your team leader or someone else you know you can call if you need help with a query or referral.
- Having knowledge of appropriate referral systems and procedures (for example, knowing who to contact if you encounter a child who has indicated they are at risk of harm).

During:

- Ensure you are in a calm, appropriately private environment, with adequate resources, refreshments, etc.
- Ensure that both you and the child/young person has the means to record any important points/plans discussed.

Afterwards:

- Recognizing and allowing your own reactions - being aware of mood changes or ways you have been affected by the interaction.
- Knowing and recognizing signs and symptoms of extreme stress and burnout.
- Seeking support if needed, for example, knowing who to contact and how to talk about what you have experienced. This may be a colleague, manager, or the Staff and Volunteer Support Service (EAP) – 0800 030 5128.
- Acknowledging the importance of support from family, friends and peers.

Remember: You do not need to know all the answers but providing a calm containing space to talk can be of significant help. Acknowledge that we are working during a global pandemic – each of us affected in some way, and the need for a sense of safety, support, and connection with others is more important than ever. Use the framework of CALMER to remind you of your own needs in the context of supporting others: Consider, Acknowledge, Listen, Manage, Enable, Resource.