

Coronavirus and Helping Children with Autism

- advice from Educational Psychologists

If you are the parent of a child with autism then the chances are you are already extremely skilled in many of the areas needed to get through this crisis! For example: you are probably great at maintaining routines, modelling calm, being empathic, answering anxious questions, and unpicking unhelpful misunderstandings.

All of us can be unsettled by unexpected changes, and for children with autism change can be a particular source of distress. The past two weeks have seen a constant stream of unprecedented change...people leaving their workplace to work from home; cancellation of children's clubs, activities and trips; schools closing...and all of this happened too fast for adults to be able to prepare children in the ways they usually would.

So, what can parents do?

1. **Supporting emotions.** Stay as calm as possible (easier said than done!) but model and communicate that you are experiencing novel and difficult emotions, and that this is okay. Be reassuring but honest. Listen to your child's concerns and validate them - take them seriously. Show empathy, to your child and to yourself.
2. **Routine and structure.** Remain positive and maintain as much normalcy as possible. Stick to typical routines and activities as far as you are able to. Structure will help – clarity, predictability and routine all make children feel safe. Visual timetables and schedules are likely to help with this. For older children you might want to use calendars / whiteboards / daily schedules.

Having said this, you may need to relax your usual boundaries around certain behaviours to allow for more time for activities your child finds soothing or anxiety-reducing. An example could be screen time. In normal circumstances you might have quite strict rules around limiting activities such as screen time, but these are not normal circumstances! If you need to work from home, if siblings are clashing with each other,

and/or if you are struggling to entertain your child(ren) in quarantine then relaxing some rules might be best for everyone's wellbeing.

3. **Reducing anxiety.** Limit where, when and how much information-seeking about Coronavirus / Covid-19 takes place. Model responsible information-seeking (e.g. BBC / World Health Organisation (WHO) / Department for Health) and treat social media with caution. Limit the amount of reassurance-seeking questions you answer and perhaps allocate a 'worry time' for talking through worries about the situation. Distract children with useful and enjoyable activities. Remind your child of their past successes and times they have coped in challenging situations.
4. **Education.** Your child might be at home rather than at school but remember, this is not 'home schooling'. Home schooling is a very carefully considered and prepared-for situation. What we are experiencing is an emergency situation and we need to focus our resources on getting through it. Work from school, and information shared by other parents on social media can be experienced as overwhelming and unhelpful. Schools are making work available to children, and many families will find it positive and useful to include this in their routine at home. For other families this will not be possible for a range of reasons. Inevitably, children will fall behind with their learning during school closures, but when this is over they can be supported to catch up.

One idea is to get your child to tell you about all of the grown-ups who are at school and what they do e.g. teacher, lunchtime supervisor, cook, TA, PE teacher etc. You could support them to write down or draw all of these people. Then use this to talk about what you can and can't do for / with your child while they are at home. You can't be 5 different people all at once, and you're not a qualified teacher. So today you will concentrate on helping them with some learning (TA) and cook them their lunch (cook). Tomorrow you could play in the garden with them (lunchtime supervisor) and do some exercises with them (PE teacher).

5. You may have used **Social Stories** before, and they are brilliant for explaining to children what to expect in certain situations and why. Some organisations have created stories to explain the current pandemic (see links at the end of this document). Remember, the most

effective Social Stories are personalised so that they are engaging and meaningful to the individual child, and are age-appropriate.

6. **Wellbeing.** Protect time for wellbeing. For children with autism specialist interests and skills are important sources of enjoyment and comfort. Sensory interests can also be soothing. For parents: don't pressure yourself too much. Have 'Corona-free' time when you try to switch off from it. And remember, it's not possible to maintain your usual standards and expectations in your work, parenting *and* family life in this crisis.
7. And finally, try to focus on positives. Could the current situation offer an opportunity for more family time and/or doing something you enjoy that you haven't had time for can? Things feel difficult now but we can still imagine and plan nice events for the future.

Useful links:

Further information for parents of a child with autism:

https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/peterborough/fsd/files/autism_self_isolation_guidance_for_parents_3.pdf

<https://www.clinical-partners.co.uk/child-adolescents/autistic-spectrum-disorders/podcasts>

<https://soundcloud.com/user-664361280/coronavirus-helping-children-with-autism>

Social stories:

<https://www.acamh.org/app/uploads/2020/03/Freddy-school-and-the-corona-virus.pdf>

<https://www.acamh.org/app/uploads/2020/03/When-anxiety-feels-overwhelming-2.pdf>

<https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/peterborough/fsd/files/pan-demics-and-the-coronavirus.pdf>

Mindfulness techniques:

<http://psychologytools.com/technique-mindfulness.html>

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk//mindfulness.htm>

Relaxation techniques:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk//relax.htm>

<http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/relaxation.asp>

<https://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/MuscleRelaxation.pdf>

Information from the National Autistic Society:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus.aspx>

Information from Mind:

https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=info&utm_content=coronaviruswellbeing#collapse15551

Information from East Anglian Children's Hospices (EACH):

<https://www.each.org.uk/family-zone/wellbeing-resources-for-families>

