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## **COVID-19: Helping Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Cope**

***Attribute to:*** *Trina Krischon, child life specialist at Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital*

The typical school day as we knew it has changed for all children during the coronavirus pandemic. For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), this sudden change in routine has been especially challenging and disruptive. Here's some advice on how parents can help children with ASD adjust to the changes in their predictable daily schedule.



**Trina Krischon, child life specialist at Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital**

### **What are some of the key challenges right now for children with ASD?**

One of the most important things for children with ASD is that they have a routine. Most are used to going to school and it can be difficult for some children to cope when their routine has been disrupted. Having a schedule is very important to their sense of calm and normalcy. With kids now having to stay home for an extended period of time, the stressors of having their routine disrupted is likely to cause them anxiety and stress, which may be evident in their behavior and acting out. I suggest working with your child's teacher to maintain a schedule at home that is as similar to your child's school schedule to the best of your ability.

I recommend limiting access to media, and I say that to all families with kids – even those who are not on the spectrum. Most children sense how the adults around them are feeling and will pick up on angst, anxiety and panic. It is best for parents to remain calm and try to answer questions as honestly as they can, and communicate with their child in a way that is familiar to them. Most families with an autistic child are communicating through pictures. There are some resources online, such as this [free social narrative](#), which help provide visuals about what is happening right now.

It's also more important than ever to explain to children with ASD to communicate if they aren't feeling well. For many, their brain doesn't register discomfort, pain or tiredness in the same way as other children. Parents need to monitor their children carefully because they may not be communicating that their throat hurts or that they feel hot or can't breathe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, monitoring becomes very important. Most children will benefit if parents continue to use whatever communication device is utilized at school during this time at home. If, for example your child uses the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or communication device, incorporate the use of that device at home. Anything parents can do to make their day similar to what it was will help.

### **How can parents help their child during this difficult time?**

Your child is unique, and because you know them best, think about how much information you want to provide them, and the extent of detail that will help them without overwhelming them. With COVID-19, depending on their ability to understand, some kids may find comfort in knowing details, where others may become more anxious and benefit from having less access to information or modified details.

As parents, you are the number one advocate for your child. It's important to stay in touch with your child's teachers, support staff, and therapists. Many children with special needs rely on their support team every day to keep them centered. They may not understand why they are not seeing them regularly, and fear that they are gone. This is when virtual connections through apps such as FaceTime or Zoom can be really beneficial. Such connections may enable kids to see their teacher and/or therapist and maintain those important relationships during this stressful time. You may want to consider setting time aside for your child to virtually connect with classmates and friends that they are accustomed to seeing every day through this same venue.

### **What are some activities that can help keep children with ASD occupied?**

My first question would be, "What would the child be doing at that time if they were still enrolled in school?" Keep in mind that maintaining a reliable routine may be beneficial, and try to incorporate similar school activities wherever possible. The reality is that most children with sensory issues cannot be left for even short periods of time without supervision, which adds great challenges to working parents during this crisis. Many children that are considered to be on the autism spectrum are able to access and utilize online learning games, and although we not want children to become overly dependent on any type of screened device, it may help for a short time. Also encourage gross motor activities. Consider yoga or online activities for kids. This encourages movement and flexibility, and is important not only for their mental health but also their physical health.

### **How do you keep a "sensory craver" busy at home?**

Often it helps to alternate stimulation. Rather than having all of your child's favorite sensory items/toys within reach, it often helps to rotate them in and out of reach so that each becomes more novel and fresh. Keep in mind that you never want to remove a favorite item that the child is very attached to. Children will often have a renewed sense of excitement over an older toy/item that they have not seen in a while and rediscover new ways of playing with it.