



Supporting children with autism spectrum disorder in the COVID-19 environment

There are many changes that have come about quickly as a result of COVID-19. For children, these changes include (but are not limited to) different routines, school closures, and reduced connectedness with extended family, teachers and friends. We can all feel stressed when our routine changes and feel worried about diseases that can make people sick. During times of uncertainty and stress, all young people benefit from support. Young people with autism may need extra support at this time to process these worries and changes.

Autism is a spectrum and as such the needs and ability level of each individual child may vary enormously. Below is a list of some support strategies that may be useful. Each can be adapted to suit the needs of the individual child. When choosing which tools and strategies are most useful, including your child in the decision will give them some ownership and can encourage their use.

Talk it through

We feel less worried when we know facts. Talk about COVID-19 with your child. Answer honestly and simply any questions your child may have. The following will be helpful to support this conversation:

- Keep it simple – focus on the essential information.
- Avoid metaphors/abstract language (e.g. “she fell ill”).
- Use clear/concrete language (e.g. COVID-19 is a type of virus that makes people sick).
- Give facts (e.g., most people who get coronavirus will not get very sick).
- Use a social story to clarify the message. Many young people on the autism spectrum, benefit from receiving information in multiple formats (visual as well as verbal). Follow the following link for an example of a social story <https://bit.ly/3dXjlqD>.
- Give reassurance and hope – “this is temporary”.

Explain the ‘rules’

Being part of the solution can help us feel in control. Explain the rules and what you can do to help stop the spread.

- Use social stories to explain concepts such as ‘social distancing’ and why washing your hands is important.
- Washing hands – use a visual schedule and place this in the bathroom to demonstrate how to wash hands thoroughly.
- Make handwashing fun – the recommendation is to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ – or pick a song that is 20 seconds long and liked by your child.

Manage the routine

While many usual routines may have changed, there is still plenty that can stay the same. Routine provides a level of predictability and comfort for young people with autism.

- Keep the morning routine as it was (e.g., still pack a lunch box).
- Have lunch/recess at the times it would usually happen at school.
- Stick to usual sleep routines – sleep difficulties are common in children with autism. Paying attention to sleep routine and sleep hygiene is important now. Fatigue can have a negative impact on cognitive function, so make sure your child is getting enough sleep.
- Make a visual daily schedule that works for the whole family. Allow for some limited choice options within the day (e.g., choice of going for a walk or a jump on the trampoline). Choice helps to relieve anxiety by offering some control over things.
- Stick with the usual out-of-school hours routine where possible (e.g., Friday movie night).

Make time visible

Young people with autism can struggle with abstract concepts like time, especially if they haven't mastered telling the time yet.

- Use visual timers.
- Be concrete with how long a task will be (e.g., “we will work on this activity until 9.45am” as opposed to “do this for a few minutes”)

Turn down the noise

We are constantly bombarded with information, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

- Try to limit the amount of exposure your child has to news and monitor their viewing.
- Turn off the TV and switch to non-news programs.
- Try to talk about other things.

Create a quiet space

Create a space where your child can retreat to if things are getting too much. It can be hard being home for so long with others living in close proximity.

- Pick a space that feels safe and quiet and is free from distractions.
- Fill the area with sensory objects, activities and toys that are calming.
- Noise-cancelling headphones may be helpful.
- Make sure others in the house know this is your child's special quiet space and set up some rules for when it is being used.
- Encourage your child to use the space when needed throughout the day.

Support home-based learning

- Create a quiet space where school work can be completed.
- Minimise distractions and clutter (e.g., turn off TV, move items not related to the task off the table).
- Create a visual timetable and include breaks and fun activities.
- Set up an area where books and equipment for learning are all in the one place and easy to locate to assist with organisation and planning skills.
- Use to do lists and encourage your child to tick things off as they achieve them.
- Break tasks down. Working memory and other difficulties with thinking skills may mean your child becomes overwhelmed easily.
- Thinking skills can be impacted by anxiety and stress. This can make concentrating more difficult. Keep this in mind!
- Lower expectations around workload as it is more cognitively demanding doing work in a different setting/routine.

Manage transitions

Transitions can be difficult for young people with autism as they can often struggle with flexibility and behavioural rigidity. Setting some boundaries around transitions now, may make things easier when we do get back to normal.

Devices

We are spending more time on computers and other devices as a result of schooling/learning from home.

- Transitioning off devices can be difficult. Set clear limits around use.
- Use visual timers/count down timers to make the time left clear (e.g., set timer for 5 minutes rather than say “a few more minutes”).
- ‘Screen time’ to ‘Green time’ can be a helpful way to transition. Move from using a device to some form of outdoor/physical activity that helps manage the endorphin release associated with screen use.
- Transitioning from ‘play’ on screen to ‘learning’ on screen may be difficult. Completing a different task in between to differentiate may be useful – such as having a snack.

Routines

- Try to stick to usual routines where possible when at home.
- Routines provide predictability and cues for transition points (e.g., eat dinner and then shower).
- The more the routine can stay the same each side of school hours the easier it may be when things return to normal.

Connecting

Many young people will need explicit help to connect with others at this time. Support them by:

- arranging opportunities for connecting with friends/family/teachers.
- using your child's preferred method of communicating (e.g., texting, talking on the phone, FaceTime).
- checking whether whole class videoconferencing is overwhelming and overstimulating. You could discuss alternative smaller group sessions with teachers.
- supporting conversations with the use of visuals/screen-share where appropriate.

Managing emotions

There are many strategies that can be used to manage stress. Some strategies that may be useful include:

- exercising (while sticking to routes that are usually followed if going for a walk)
- getting outside
- using sensory strategies that are calming
- doing activities your child enjoys/that are an area of interest.

Changes in your child's behaviour, ability to concentrate or learn may be a sign that they are experiencing anxiety or depression. Things to look out for include:

- agitation/aggression
- increased meltdowns
- repetitive questioning/increase in repetitive behaviours
- sleep disturbance
- changes to eating patterns/appetite.

Self-care and support for parents and carers

The sense of uncertainty around COVID-19, coupled with the challenges of caring for a young person with autism, can place families under great stress. Parents and carers often work hard to support their child's wellbeing, so it is important to ensure that their own wellbeing does not become secondary.

There are various ways parents and carers can look after their own mental health and wellbeing.

- It can be hard to find time for yourself, but even a 10–15 minute break each day can help relieve stress in the short- and long-term. Being able to switch off and recharge can go a long way towards better wellbeing. Staying connected to family and friends through WhatsApp, Zoom or Skype can make a big difference.
- Reaching out to support groups such as Amaze (www.amaze.org.au) is a great way to connect and share stories, tips and advice with other families. The Autism Advisory and Support Service (AASS) also provides a range of services to support families. The AASS includes a 24-hour support hotline that you can call anytime on 1300 222 777.
- If you are experiencing distress or poor mental health there are a range of professional services available to support you. You may be eligible to see a psychologist through a Mental Health Treatment Plan (see below for more information). If you would like to chat with someone now, give Beyondblue a call on 1300 22 46 36 or Lifeline on 13 11 14. Both of these services are available to help and support people through difficult times 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- If you need to understand more about your child's learning needs and cognitive and behavioural functioning, an assessment by a paediatric neuropsychologist may be helpful.

Seek support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you or your child experience as a result of COVID-19 is impacting on everyday life, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals, skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns and disorders.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.

Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the:



A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities.**
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders.**
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties.**

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