

Dealing with the Coronavirus Outbreak:

Top Tips for parents of kids with neurodevelopmental needs

In these uncertain times, everyone is feeling a little unsure about how to manage the changes we have been faced with. When your child has additional needs this can create even more anxiety. You may notice your child being more clingy than usual, or they may display other signs of feeling anxious that are particular to them. This may be evident in their behaviour or sleep patterns.

For children and young people with Autism sudden change can be particularly difficult and it may feel overwhelming or distressing.

Helping children understand COVID-19:

- Give them clear and honest facts at a level they can understand. It is likely that you have found an appropriate way to communicate with your child, so your usual method of communication will be the most effective.
- Use visual aids or social stories to help with understanding if needed (see resource list).
- Educate yourself on the facts about Coronavirus & COVID-19 from the official government site (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>). Focusing on facts and evidence can help reduce anxiety. Try not to volunteer too much information as this could be overwhelming for your child. It's okay to not know everything, being available to your child is what matters.
- Try to not have the news on the television or radio too much and try to encourage a child not to search for further information on the internet, as misinformation is likely to raise anxiety.
- If they have missed out on important activities which were cancelled consider making a poster with them of the activities to be rescheduled, when possible, so they know they will not be forgotten.

Planning a new schedule

As usual daily routines will have changed, it is important to replace these with new schedules and timetables. Structured days with regular mealtime and bedtimes are an essential part of keeping kids happy and healthy. Keep activities varied in between, to balance out the day and keep things interesting.

- When possible involve the young person in planning a new schedule and routine. An unstructured day or routine is likely to be more stressful than having a new timetable which they can follow.
- If the child needs to be at home, leaving the day unstructured is likely to be far more stressful than creating a new timetable to follow.

- Factor in time for activities that your child enjoys and try to find alternatives to activities that they are missing out on in their usual routine. For example, if they enjoy going to chess club, they could instead play chess online.
- Remember to prioritise down-time for your child. This is essential for all children but even more so for those who have sensory needs. Having this time is just as important for parents – you might also want to use this as a time for you to relax, or if you have another time in the day to relax, this can be a time for you to complete your own tasks.

Encourage virtual meet-ups:

- Try to help your child stay in touch with the people they are close to so that social anxieties do not grow when they reintegrate with their friends and fellow pupils, and social distancing ceases. This can be friends, family, teachers etc.
- Discuss being safe online with your child and supervise them and know who they are talking to.

Sleep Routine:

- No caffeine after midday
- Engaging in some form of exercise if possible in the day
- Only using the bed for sleep at night time (not sitting on it on iPads during the day, for example)
- No screens an hour before bed
- Try to go to bed at the same time every day and get up at the same time every day.

Managing changes in the family home:

- Consider consistent behavioral strategies you will use, as needed, with your child. Discuss with those at home so everyone is clear and consistent.
- If you are not able to purchase the food you typically buy consider meal planning with what you do have so your child has some advance notice of what is to be available for meals.
- Consider noise levels in the house if more of you are at home than normal. Due to sensory sensitivities, your child may become more aroused with more people in the house. Think about how you can reduce the arousal levels. For example, would your child benefit from wearing ear defenders at home or listening to their music through headphones?
- Do they have a quiet space they can go to if needed, with items in that space that will calm them. If so, let them know about this during a calm moment.
- Try talking with your child about the early warning signs that show they might be becoming over-stimulated. Have an agreement that if they feel these signs or you spot them, there is a code word or a sign they can use, and that is when they can access their quiet space to calm.

Look after yourself: Many adults are also feeling stressed out right now, and that's normal and understandable. In the rush to make sure your child feels safe and calm, we often forget to ask ourselves 'how am I feeling?'.

- It's important to notice and manage our own anxiety. If you feel yourself getting anxious, stop, sit down and take a moment to try and calm yourself. Relax yourself in ways that work for you. For some people taking deep breaths and gentle stretching can help as you are may be holding your body in a tense position.
- Be realistic and kind to yourself: Working, parenting, and teaching are three different jobs so doing more than one of these tasks is bound to feel tough. Try to avoid setting unrealistic expectations on yourself – instead, do the best that you can.
- If you are stressed, reach out to others as it is likely that other parents who you know will also be feeling this way.
- Try to find some time for yourself (for example, before wake-up or after bed-time) even if it is only for a brief amount of time. During this time do something that makes you feel good – this might be a relaxing activity, connecting with family/friends virtually, spending time with you partner, or doing something that you find fulfilling and enjoyable.

Resource List:

National Autistic Society has a range of information including Top Tips for Families.

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

Videos/Webinars/Podcasts

- For children who use Makaton – youtube channel-Singing Hands has a range of videos. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSgfgkristwvJft3BNN-NYQ>
- Washing Hands: Good video to visually explain how to wash hands effectively for young children or those with SEN
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQCP7waTRWU&feature=emb_title
- What is Corona Virus: A video for children to explain what Coronavirus is and what they can do to stop the spread <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ECPrtjnoCg>
- The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health -Episode 4 'Autism, a parents guide' with Dr. Ann Ozsivadjan and Dr. Marianna Murin. This podcast focuses on practical tips like how to help manage anxiety, maintain structure and support and explain the situation to young people. Additionally, tips on how to keep well as a parent and reliable sources for coronavirus <https://www.acamh.org/podcasts/coronavirus-autism-a-parents-guide/>

Downloadable guidance, posters and resources:

- Social story to explain what a pandemic means and how to stop it.
<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf?fbclid=IwAR23zxNlbEumpw4oKIM7Xy3VIKnA25b8Gi53N6YiFleKB9Vx0LQypSPYzzg>
- Social story to explain COVID-19 and what everyone can do to stop the spread.
<https://littlepuddins.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Accessible-Corona-Virus-Social-Story-The-Autism-Educator.pdf>
- A short activity book to explain COVID-19 and what can be done to help prevention. Suitable for children under 7 or children with SEN. Available in 22 languages.
<https://www.mindheart.co/descargables?fbclid=IwAR0KlrEOy4hv3rD6e875upiy1F3GwYtn7NXMXS3BerMZDT-xbJpL8rAnMi8>