

Learning while at home: ideas for autistic pupils and students and their parents/carers during Coronavirus (Covid-19) distancing measures.

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This document was created with input from five families which include autistic children and autistic and non-autistic parents.

1. The top priority is obviously to keep things as calm as possible for the whole household. This is an extraordinary situation. Autistic people are not usually comfortable with unpredictable change, so it is important to create as much predictability as possible in this new situation. Doing so will take some time. (When the time comes, the transition back into routines which have been disrupted will also require careful planning.)
2. Lower your expectations around school/college work. It is more important to prioritise wellbeing (including nutrition, exercise, fun and rest). Creating calm and security is a higher priority than absolutely keeping up with every aspect of academic work. Other people are not keeping up either. If by the end of the day everyone has remained quite calm, eaten enough, had some exercise (ideally outside), had some fun, rested, and done something they would think of as productive and satisfying, that is a good day. If things have not gone so well it is important to reflect without self-blame. There is always tomorrow.
3. The way you explain the situation will depend on the autistic person's level of curiosity and understanding. Some will be very engaged in the news and may be quite frightened. Others may be more concerned about the changes to their own routine. Limiting the news to once a day may help to develop a sense of containment. The broadcast could be followed by a reflective activity focussing on what needs to be done by whom and why. This could include consideration of the desired outcome of any action and a recognition of who needs to take responsibility for what. Getting the autistic person to focus on what they/their family can control might be useful. A tangible achievable controllable action might be, for example, 'Go out of the house for 30 minutes each day for exercise'. Keeping an eye on anxiety triggers and avoiding them where possible is important.
4. When creating a new routine, it might be useful to use visual timetables and to involve the whole family in the process. School/college work could be included in a daily timetable which also includes other activities (eg meals). These could all be represented visually, for example on a family wall planner.

Symbols which are familiar to the autistic person might be useful. If using photographs it would make more sense to use a photograph of the autistic person rather than someone else. Various apps can be utilised and some examples are included at the end. Sticking with familiar apps might be the best approach unless the autistic person is particularly interested in researching alternatives. An online calendar, eg Outlook, might be the most appropriate resource for some autistic people. It may be helpful for the whole family to have such a timetable. The autistic person may benefit from regular timetabled sessions at the beginning and end of the day so that they can go over the routine and get a sense of what will be happening. Utilising approaches that are already familiar is likely to be most helpful.

5. The autistic person might worry that they are the only person in this situation. It is important to tell them that everyone in school/college is doing the same. Say it, don't imply it.
6. Specific areas in the house could be identified for school/college work. These should be minimally distracting and comfortable. It may be useful for the autistic pupil to wear their school sweatshirt while doing schoolwork but only if this makes sense to them.
7. Project-based work which fits with an individual's particular in-depth interests is a good idea.
8. Social contact can be maintained via various platforms, eg Skype, Zoom. It would be worth planning jointly with other parents about how this might be managed. Maintaining contact with important people this way is likely to be helpful. The autistic person might worry otherwise that these people have disappeared from their lives forever. Gaming is a common in-depth interest and this sort of activity may involve interacting with people who are in various time zones. Gaming might have to be timetabled to avoid sleep deprivation.
9. It is OK to increase screen time. Parental controls can be used, and it is worth exploring the wide range of learning and wellbeing resources which are being made available via the internet, especially if these fit well with the in-depth interests of the autistic person.
10. If learning feels a bit passive, eg watching a documentary: *a)* it does not really matter, and *b)* follow up activities such as quizzes can be devised. These can be carried out in groups via platforms such as Skype or Teams but only if doing so is fun and does not create extra stress.
11. The autistic pupil or student may like to get involved in educating their siblings through project work which fits in with their interests and expertise. Being given some responsibility can develop a sense of being in control of aspects of a complicated situation.

12. Academic learning is not the only purposeful activity. It might be useful to use the time to teach skills such as cooking, and for the autistic person to take a turn as teacher too. Some practical and independence skills may appear to be decreasing at this time of great stress. This will be redeemable in less uncertain times. It is important not to give the autistic person the impression that this is a big deal as doing so may well increase their anxiety.
13. Rewarding an activity which they find dull and pointless with a small amount of time focussing on the autistic person's in-depth interest, is likely to be less successful than focussing the activity schedule around the in-depth interests. These have enormous motivational potential.
14. If using exercise books, it is best to choose those which have detachable pages so that if the autistic pupil makes a mistake, they will not feel like they have spoiled the whole book.
15. Family projects can be motivating, for example completing a piece of artwork on a wall, producing meals together or creating a gardening project.
16. Sharing family responsibilities can be helpful. Specific job titles and job descriptions (eg 'Head of laundry') might be fun. Family members could even apply for these jobs.
17. It is very unlikely that formal learning can be sustained throughout the school/college day. Focussed learning for shorter amounts of time, one-to-one or in small family groups, is probably equally effective. Independent learning at an appropriate level should be encouraged, both to give the parents a break and to help the autistic person to develop. The internet is full of open learning resources which could be appropriate provided they are of interest to the individual. It does not matter if one area of the curriculum takes priority over another. If the school appears not to understand that the autistic person cannot be as academically productive as they are in normal circumstances, it may be that teachers have not quite realised the strain the autistic person is under. This can be politely explained, and school may well be a great source of help and support if a mutual understanding can be reached. Prioritising wellbeing is important. Ending up with 5 rather than 8 GCSEs is not the end of the world.
18. Choice can be useful. The autistic person might have a particular skill they wish to develop. A limited choice between two alternatives, or choice about the order of activities, can be less disconcerting than being faced with a blank sheet or the whole 'pick and mix' scenario. Some autistic people might like to use a numerical ranking system to help with prioritisation. Prioritising can also help with anxiety. Lists can be useful for this purpose.

19. Time and space to decompress is useful if it's all getting to be too much. Autistic people usually have calming mechanisms such as engaging in a favourite activity or something which is physically comforting, like hand flapping, rocking or getting away from sensory overload in a quiet place. These are meaningful behaviours and should not be discouraged. Various apps to reduce anxiety could be helpful, particularly if these are already familiar. The need to decompress applies to the whole family. The autistic person is not the only one who is stressed out in this global pandemic and enforced 24-hour contact with their entire family at home. Sources of support outside the home, eg by telephone, are worth exploring. Fun is particularly important.
20. It is likely that the school/college can offer advice. It is essential to work out how this advice sits within your family, with the wellbeing of the whole family as a central concern. If completing a piece of work in a particular way causes distress and disrupts the calm of the household, the activity needs to be reframed or even abandoned in favour of something that works better.

Resources

National Autistic Society

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

Resources for autistic people and families

The coronavirus outbreak is having an impact on everybody's life. Social distancing means that most events are cancelled, schools are closed, and people must work from home when they can.

This is hard for everyone, but we know that for some autistic people of all ages these things could trigger intense stress and lead to a meltdown or a shut down.

Therefore, we have collected a series of useful resources that autistic people and their families can use during this time of changes.

Resources for autistic people of all ages

- Explain changes
[Social stories](#) - Carol Gray has created one about coronavirus. We have also created one about [keeping healthy](#). More about social stories can be found [here](#).
- Make a new daily schedule

We know it is important to many autistic people to have a daily routine and we have created a template you can use to schedule your daily activities [here](#).

- Keep children entertained

[Sensory Stuck at Home](#) is a Facebook page where parents of autistic children share ideas of activities to do in the house.

- Manage anxiety

[Mind](#) has created some helpful information about well-being during this unprecedented time of change.

- Keep in touch

Sign up to the National Autistic Society [online community](#), where you can chat with hundreds of people and share ideas and tips on how to deal with this situation.

Activities to do at home with your family

- Keep exercising

On [this page](#) you can find movement and mindfulness videos to keep you children active.

- Virtual tours

[This website](#) allows you to visit museums from the comfort of your home.

- 100 things to do indoors

You can [download this book](#) free of cost and make staying indoors fun and use the time to help yourself and others.

Resources about coronavirus and how to deal with it

[Autistica - Coping with Uncertainty](#)

[Social story to help autistic children/adults](#)

[Purple Ella video about how to deal with coronavirus](#)

[Children friendly coronavirus social animation](#)

[Coronavirus and anxiety advice](#)

[More coronavirus and anxiety advice](#)

[Mental health and coronavirus](#)

[Coronavirus tips](#)

[Advice for families re. how to support children who have learning disabilities and/or autism while isolating](#)

[Social story to help autistic children](#)

Resources about the impact of coronavirus on schools and services

[The National Autistic Society](#)

[FAQs on the how the COVID-19 measures will affect children and young people with special educational needs](#)

[Emergency info for Carers](#)

Resources for families

[SEND School Closure Home Learning Resource Pack](#)

[Ideas for what to do with autistic children who are stuck at home](#)

[Ideas to keep children busy](#)

[Indoors activities from The Scouts](#)

[Interactive mindfulness videos](#)

[Swansea Branch's Pinterest Account - lots of great resources on topics ranging from gardening to science to Pokemon](#)

[Virtual activities such as museum tours](#)

Autism helpline: The autism helpline is operating email and webform service only for the time being. Find out how to contact the helpline [here](#).

Resources from other websites

Home Schooling

<https://www.techradar.com/uk/news/free-home-schooling-apps-and-websites#the-best-homeschooling-resources-for-the-uk>

Wellbeing

7 Apps to Help Calm Individuals with Autism, Anxiety, Other Special Needs

<https://www.eastersealstech.com/2017/04/19/chill-outz-relaxation-techniqu>