

Strategies for Families Affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) During the COVID-19 Pandemic

These are tough times with tougher questions. We are here to try and help.

In the past few weeks, we have asked parents and caregivers, therapists and clinicians, and those with ASD themselves, what has been helping you get by during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Here are some of the suggestions we found. We want to share them with you and ask you, what are your strategies?

Can you share them with us? Please email your strategies, tips and activities to JeffCAN@jefferson.edu.

Use subject line: **Strategies During COVID-19 Pandemic**

ACCEPTANCE

Accept and understand that nothing is going as anyone expected right now. Allow yourself and your child some leeway to do less than expected for the time being. Some behavioral/skill regression is likely under these stressful circumstances, but growth will return. Decreasing the pressure on yourself can have a significant impact on reducing your stress levels.

Recognize that recent life stress scenarios are easily sensed and likely to be highly anxiety-provoking. Offer simple, honest explanations that are logical and make sense. Be aware of what the kids hear and listen to and might internalize; there is a lot of misinformation being spread.

Using visual or social stories can be helpful in explaining the virus and safety measures, such as hand washing and how to deal with coping strategies. Our COVID-19 visual stories can be found at hospitals.jefferson.edu/departments-and-services/center-for-autism-and-neurodiversity.html

SCHEDULE

Keep a schedule. Try to establish some sense of routine: wake up, get dressed and showered, try to offer some sense of predictability (even if it is in small measures). Call your grandparents every day at 6:00 p.m. for example. Try making a calendar with small goals and dates: first day of spring, holidays, etc.—so you can count down the days to small things.

This does not mean you have to be rigid. Make sure to include time for movement breaks. Meeting sensory needs is more important than ever. Do not let sleep/wake cycles flip. Showering every day can also improve a sense of wellbeing.

Use picture schedules to help identify what happens when during the day. You may have a different schedule in every room. Using pictures can help manage expectations. An activity can be drawing pictures or taking pictures with your phone. If you have a printer available, print photos and make picture schedules.

MOVEMENT AND EXERCISE

Make sure you are moving. Exercise is important for everyone, but has been especially shown to reduce anxiety in those with ASD. Look for telehealth exercise programs online. Being inside also does not mean staying in one place. If you can, switch rooms for different activities to get a fresh perspective.

Also, staying away from others does not always mean staying inside. Taking a walk or a bike ride and being exposed to sunlight and fresh air are important for mental health and well-being. If you have taken your walk for the day, consider a drive with the windows down to get a change in scenery. Take in a sunset if you can!

SCREEN TIME

Loosen some restrictions on television and electronic devices. Make sure that some of the screen time is active. There are exercises programs that are free online.

REWARDS

This is also not the time to hold back on the occasional external reinforcer (i.e. tangible reward) for expected or preferred behaviors. Sometimes completing a task is the reward. There are also times when external rewards (like a snack or a special toy) can be motivation toward completing the task.

CAREGIVERS NEED CARE TOO

Take more frequent breaks. It's hard for us to focus and concentrate, so it is likely hard for our kids as well. Be forgiving of yourself if you have to let some things go (the house may not be as neat, dinner might be late, etc.).

RELAXING

Breathe. You do not have to be a master at meditation to take a moment and take some deep breaths. Taking deep breaths is free and has been shown to reduce anxiety.

Guided meditation can give those in your family a chance to get in touch with how each part of them feels and perhaps identify symptoms of any oncoming sickness. It can also provide a systematic way of having each part of the body relax.

STAYING IN TOUCH WHILE KEEPING YOUR DISTANCE

Social distancing can be difficult. We need to think of different ways to stay in touch. Birthday parties and social gatherings can be celebrated with FaceTime phone calls. Some have organized guests for "drive by" parties. Many religious groups have online services. You can schedule daily phone check-ins to stay connected with friends and family.

HELP IS JUST A CLICK AWAY!

Look for online support groups and options for therapy to talk about your feelings and get more strategies. Many providers are offering service through Zoom or other online platforms. Stay connected with other parents and share your strategies. Doctor's visits can be made using telehealth services like JeffConnect.

MODEL STRATEGIES

Model coping mechanisms. If you are feeling overwhelmed, identify that feeling out loud and accompany it with a coping mechanism. For example, say, "I am feeling overwhelmed. I am going to take a few minutes by myself to take some deep breaths and calm down."

FAMILY SOCIAL TIME

Find a silver lining. Take this opportunity to go old school with some board games. These games can be fun and also teach us how to take turns and anticipate the moves others make, which are all useful skills for those with ASD. There are many new resources online that have distraction and educational purposes. For example, virtual tours of museums and zoos may help engage kids...and adults too!

MEAL TIME

Try to prepare meals together. Planning meals for upcoming days can be a good activity. The act of finding ingredients and cooking a meal can be a bonding experience and help build organizational skills. Sitting at the table as a family for a meal is something families have not always been able to do regularly during fast-paced regular life. This is a time to eat together with the television off and practice social skills over a meal.

ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING

Think about goals that you can work on at home. Goals can include dressing, doing laundry, making dinner, showering and changing clothes every day and adjusting the daily schedule as needed. Sit in on your children's therapies, if possible.

THE ARTS—MUSIC, DANCE, ART AND THEATER

Sing songs, play musical instruments and dance to your favorite songs, or even make up your own! Draw inside and outside. Chalk is good for outside on the sidewalk or driveway. Acting out classic stories or making up your own is another way to work on social skills in a fun way.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Currently, no one knows when isolation related to COVID-19 will be over. You don't want to indicate that things are changing by the day, because they will ask you about it every day. You want to discuss the situation in terms of weeks or months. While staying calm, you want to stress that everyone is practicing being flexible.

POSITIVE THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS

Think positively. One day this will pass. Until then, when you feel down, everyone in the house should make a list of 3 things to be grateful for. We are sure you will be able to find yourself surpassing 3. Pick something new to learn together: a new recipe, a new card game, a new song. You can write letters to people in nursing homes, or thank you notes to healthcare professionals!

We would love to share your strategies with other families! Please feel free to email your strategies, tips and activities to JeffCAN@jefferson.edu. Use subject line: **Strategies During COVID-19 Pandemic**