

Creating Structure and Providing Support During COVID-19

A guide for families of children with autism and neurodevelopmental challenges



Table of Contents

Taking Care of Yourself	3
Helping Your Child Understand COVID-19 and the Pandemic	4
Structuring Time	4
Routines	5
Visual Schedules	5
School Activities and Academic Learning	6
Household Tasks and Self-Care	7
Managing Screen Time.	8
Managing Behaviour	9
Acknowledgements.11

Children require support to understand and cope with the changes and uncertainty that comes from COVID-19 and social distancing. The characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (resistance to change, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviour) and neurodevelopmental challenges can make adapting to this pandemic especially difficult. Routines may be greatly affected, and it may be difficult for your child to understand why school and other activities are not happening.

Try to protect your child from the stress associated with social distancing. Talk about what is happening as calmly and openly as you can. Reassure your child and provide information at their level of understanding. Explain measures that help keep people safe from the virus, such as washing hands and staying home.

This document contains ideas and resources that might be helpful in supporting your child during this time.

Taking Care of Yourself

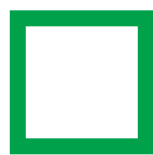
It is important to take care of yourself. Eat regularly, sleep, move your body, keep in touch with family and friends, and ask for help if you need it (by video/telephone). If you are working from home, try to structure your day so that you dedicate some time to your child and some time to your work.

If you feel overwhelmed by information about COVID-19, limit your time on social media and news outlets. Follow prevention guidelines, stick to the facts, and seek information from reliable sources such as:

- GNB: [Coronavirus](#)
- Health Canada: [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)
- World Health Organization: [COVID-19 infographics](#)

Strategy to Improve Success – Taking Care of Yourself

One way to help your child understand when you are available and when you are not is to use a pictogram. You might use a red-green system, the universal symbol for no, or thumbs up/down to indicate when you can interact with your child and when you cannot.



Yes



No



Helping Your Child Understand COVID-19 and the Pandemic

If your child can understand, explain in a calm and relaxed way what COVID-19 is and why it is important to stay at home during this time. Knowing the facts can help ease fear and anxiety. Many free resources including videos and social narratives (stories that explain something), have been created to help children with autism and other neurodevelopmental challenges understand the virus, how to prevent becoming ill, school closure, and social distancing. These include:

- BrainPOP: [Coronavirus \(video\)](#)
- The Autism Educator: [What is the coronavirus? \(printable story\)](#)
- Mindheart: [Basic picture story explaining coronavirus](#)
- [My Coronavirus Story \(Basic story explaining school closures\)](#)

Structuring Time

Some children with ASD or other neurodevelopmental challenges may have difficulty understanding the concept of time. Therefore, it may be important to help your child structure the day. It isn't necessary for your child to use a standard clock to tell time. Instead, it is important to better understand the passing of time and how it relates to activities that occur during the day. Tools such as visual timers and visual timer apps are available and can help your child "see" time passing and see how much time is left. You can also make your own tools to help your child better understand time. Options you might have at home or can make to help with time include sand timers, egg timers, calendars, and digital clocks.

There are several **free visual timer apps** available for Android and iOS devices.

Visual countdown systems are another option for helping your child understand time in relation to activities. Visual countdown systems allow you to control the countdown and are flexible regarding time. They don't show a specific time like a visual timer. Instead, the time represented by the visual can be changed based on needs in the moment. The count down system can be used to lessen or lengthen time spent on activities.

Strategy to Improve Success – Visual Countdown

To use a visual countdown system:

- Show the visual to your child and say, "In 5 we will turn off the computer." Notice that a unit of time is not included as the time is approximate and based on your needs.
- As time passes, remove a visual and remind your child how many intervals are left, ensuring your child can see the visuals as you remove them.
- Continue until all visuals are removed. When you remove the final visual, tell your child the current activity is finished and it is time for the next activity.



Visual countdown systems can be made using materials you have at home such as sticky notes, dry erase boards, coloured paper, etc.

Routines

Many children with autism and other neurodevelopmental challenges cope best when routines are consistent. Routines provide comfort by helping your child know what to expect. Changes to routine can lead to behavioural problems. Social distancing means that changes to your child's routine are probably unavoidable.

Existing Routines

You can help support your child by maintaining routines that can stay the same such as going to bed, waking up, and daily living. Proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise are important for physical and mental health.

If your child is experiencing sleep disturbances, [Autism Speaks](#) has a resource that may be helpful.

New Routines

Establishing new routines can also help provide some structure, support positive interaction with others, and manage time for structured activities and free play. New routines can include activities directed by you, other adults, or siblings and free play/sensory activities that don't require interaction with others. Mix indoor with outdoor tasks and activities while still following social distancing guidelines. Keep expectations simple and be sure to provide your child with lots of positive feedback about their participation and cooperation. Start with what is most doable and slowly build in new activities and/or expand the length of time your child spends doing things that are familiar. What you can do will depend on how much time you have, if you are working from home, have other children, etc.

Visual Schedules

A visual schedule is a support that uses objects, photographs, words, or symbols to present information visually. It provides a visual presentation of the sequence of activities for the day or for a specific time during the day. A visual schedule can also highlight changes, special events, and transitions. In some cases, using a visual schedule encourages independence and participation in activities. Even though activities may change daily, the visual schedule gives structure to the day and can help your child better understand what is expected while teaching flexibility.

- Moving from one activity to another (transitions) can be hard for individuals with ASD. Transitions can be easier when activities are predictable and have a distinct beginning and end signalled by visual or sound cues. When other visual tools, such as timers and countdown systems, are used with visual schedules, your child may better understand what is happening, when things will happen, how much time is left in an activity, and when it is time to change activities.
- It may help to identify specific areas for each activity to help your child know what activities take place where. You can put pictures on the walls or furniture to indicate the function of a space (reading, relaxation, table activities, etc.). Use tape to mark off floor space for activities such as yoga.
- Use visuals to indicate which activities are done with others (mom, dad, siblings) and which are completed alone.
- Make a list of activities your child knows how to do and enjoys and place them in order of preference. This will help you alternate between more favoured and less favoured activities, activities that provoke excitement, and activities that are done quietly. This is a time of uncertainty, so try to keep activities from being too demanding.

Set aside some time for planning each day's schedule. Allow your child to participate in the planning as much as possible. Include free time to the extent your child can be successful without direction from others, relaxation time, and structured activities that may be directed by an adult.

Strategy to Improve Success – Visual Schedule

- Use a means of communication that your child understands (objects, images, text).
- Divide the day into shorter periods and only post the schedule for one period at a time according to your child's needs.
- Check off or remove items from the schedule when they are completed. This may help your child better understand the “flow” of the day.
- Involve your child in setting up the schedule.

For picture cards and tips on setting up a visual schedule to meet your child's needs visit:

- Do2Learn: [Visual Schedules](#)
- The Inspired Treehouse: [How to Make a Visual Schedule](#)

Please note that keeping it simple with handmade drawings is ok too!

School Activities and Academic Learning

School closure can cause concern for learning. Remember that your child is learning even when not involved in school activities. Time at home can provide occasions to learn and practice social and daily living skills that can help your child be more independent and build on skills previously learned. You can take advantage of opportunities to learn when they occur during daily activities. Examples include teaching about measurement when cooking or completing craft projects, reading recipes, naming colours when playing with blocks, discussing emotions when reading books, and making shapes when playing with play dough.

Strategy to Improve Success – Academic Learning

- **Encourage reading:** Read aloud to your child, share reading, or have your child read independently. You can research topics of interest or read books and novels, recipes, newspaper articles, magazines, comic books or graphic novels.
- **Practice writing:** Writing can also take many forms and can include letters, words, phrases, or sentences. Options for writing include journals and diaries, letters to family and friends, text messages, stories, essays, comic strips, play or movie scripts, lists, or recipes. Writing can be done with a pencil and paper or with a computer. Encourage your child to share his/her written work with others if appropriate.
- **Use practical mathematics:** Math can be part of everyday activities such as baking and cooking, arts and crafts, home and building projects, planning meals, setting the table, shopping for groceries, and managing time. Encourage your child to count, measure, match, categorize, sort, add, and subtract as part of the activities he/she is already doing during the day.

Household Tasks and Self-Care

Involve your child in simple household chores. Tasks related to meals, laundry, and house cleaning can help structure the day and provide routine. They will allow your child to participate in and contribute to family life and help develop independence. Try to make chores fun and interesting and adapt them to your child's preferences and abilities.

Some activities to consider:

Sorting

Have your child sort cutlery (forks, knives, spoons) when putting away dishes or match socks when folding laundry.

Folding

Have your child fold facecloths, towels, pillow cases and other laundry.

Setting the table

Have your child count needed items for setting the table for a meal and/or set a place for each member of the family. Use place mats and templates to help guide him/her.

Cooking

Make simple recipes and have your child assist with washing, peeling, cutting, measuring, stirring and pouring ingredients. Able2learn.com provides easy to follow [picture recipes](#).

Tidying up/cleaning

Clearing the table, sweeping the floor, doing dishes, removing sheets from beds, picking up toys and other items around the house and placing them in baskets, putting laundry in hampers, or putting clothes away all help with independence and provide structure to the day.

YouTube videos can be helpful for learning how to do a task. Watch these videos with your child and practise the skills:

- [How to Wash the Dishes](#)
- [How to Clean Up](#)

Hygiene/Self-care

Help your child develop independence with self-care tasks such as brushing teeth, washing hands, and dressing. There are also some helpful videos on YouTube. You can watch the videos with your child and then help him/her practice the skills.

- [How to wash your hands](#)
- [Washing hands routine](#)
- [Washing Face \(Text and Voice\)](#)
- [Brushing Teeth \(boy\)](#)
- [Brushing Teeth \(girl\)](#)
- [How to brush your teeth](#)

Do2learn.com provides several [free visual reminders](#) that may help your child complete the sequence of steps in hygiene and daily living tasks.

Managing Screen Time

Managing the use of screens (i.e., computer, TV, iPad, etc.) can be difficult at the best of times! Screen use may increase during this time and that is OK. You can still set a limit on the total amount of screen time each day. The total time can be broken up into smaller increments that are spread out across the day. Screen time can also be alternated with other activities, such as reading or household tasks, or used as a reward for completing other tasks and activities. It may be easier for your child to change activities if non-preferred activities don't immediately follow screen time.

It may be helpful to use a verbal warning, visual timer, or visual countdown system to let your child know when screen time is coming to an end and that it is time to transition to another activity. Giving a verbal warning, such as "1 more minute of screen time" lets your child know that a change in activity is coming. Some children respond better to visual reminders like visual timers or countdown systems.

Positive social support is important while practising social distancing. Using screen time to interact with family and friends may provide good opportunities for staying connected and practising communication and social interaction skills such as greetings, taking turns to speak, answering and asking questions, and commenting. Remember, even if your child can use text messages and other electronic communications independently, they may require support to ensure social connections continue.

If you want to help your child practice back-and-forth conversation, Do2learn.com has many resources that can be used to help with [improving communication skills](#).

Screen time can also be learning time. There are many free online options that may entertain your child and are educational.

- [Calgary Zoo: Panda Cam](#)
- [Art Gallery of Ontario](#)
- [Sea Lion Beach at OrcaLab](#)
- [Vancouver Aquarium: Penguin Cam](#)
- [Vancouver Aquarium: Sea Otter Cam](#)
- [Virtual Museum of Canada](#)
- [Farm Food 3600: Farm Tours](#)
- [The Louvre: Online Tours](#)
- [Access Mars](#) (use Chrome as your browser)
- [Great Wall of China Travel Guide](#)
- [The Kitchen Table Classroom: Art and Learning at Home](#)

If your child has access to the Internet, it is important to monitor viewing of social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, and news media. Although these media allow you and your child to access important information and maintain social contact with family and friends, they can also overload your child with anxiety provoking content.



Managing Behaviour

Behaviour is communication which means that it serves a purpose for your child. Problem behaviour often helps the child get something he/she wants or get out of something he/she doesn't want. The best way to manage behaviour when faced with the challenge of disrupted routines is to prevent unwanted behaviour while also supporting positive behaviour.

Some strategies to help support your child during this time include:





Using your child's interests and preferences to influence his/her motivation to participate and complete tasks, especially new/unfamiliar tasks.

For example, if your child likes a certain cartoon character, use toys or pictures of that character during activities or use the toy as a reward for completing tasks. Preferred toys, food, drinks, and activities may help increase your child's willingness to participate in less preferred tasks and activities. You can use a "first-then" approach to show your child that a preferred activity follows a non-preferred or new activity.

First	Then
<p data-bbox="370 800 513 829">Wash Dishes</p> 	<p data-bbox="943 800 1089 829">Play Outside</p> 

Provide your child with choice when possible

We are all motivated by things we enjoy and providing choice can help increase your child's motivation to complete tasks and participate in activities. It is possible to allow your child to make choices while staying in control of the options. For example, you might offer a choice between different coloured cups, which foods to eat during a meal, or the order that tasks are done, or take turns completing parts of a task which all give your child the option to choose which parts they complete.

Choices			
			

Mix tasks your child finds difficult with tasks that can be done easily

Mixing tasks promotes success and increases the likelihood that your child will respond appropriately when more challenging activities are presented. For example, planning reading between an art activity and music may allow your child to enjoy more preferred activities before and after a less preferred activity, rather than use behaviour to avoid the less preferred activity.

Be sure your child can do what you are asking

Your child must be able to understand what is expected and use mastered skills. Asking your child to do something they cannot do may cause unwanted behaviour.

Provide a variety of activities to influence motivation

Doing the same thing over and over can be boring and lead to unwanted behaviour. Vary activities, materials, order of tasks, and rewards often.

Indoor Activities	Outdoor Activities
Cooking	Walking/hiking
Games: board games, card games, video games	Visiting a local park
Music and dancing	Taking a bike ride
Scavenger hunts and puzzles	Walking the dog
Arts and crafts that require painting, colouring, cutting, and pasting	Gardening/yard work
Household chores	Bird watching
Yoga/exercise	Taking a drive
Reading	Active games such as Chase and Hide 'n' Seek
Fine motor activities (activities that use the fingers and hands) such as threading beads, playing with marbles, sorting objects, or stacking blocks	Gross motor activities (activities that use the legs and arms) such as playing with a ball, dancing, and climbing on playground equipment
Drawing, printing, painting	
Make a play with play dough	
Toy play	

Recognize that your child may need support with coping and self-management. You can encourage your child to practice coping and calming strategies they already know and use such as rocking in a rocking chair, listening to music, deep breathing, yoga, etc. You can add the practice of coping and calming strategies to the daily routine. Also, be aware of signs of anxiety so that you can remind your child to practise coping and calming strategies when needed. If your child has not learned coping and calming strategies, it may be beneficial to teach some.

Some ideas for coping and calming strategies include:

Relaxation

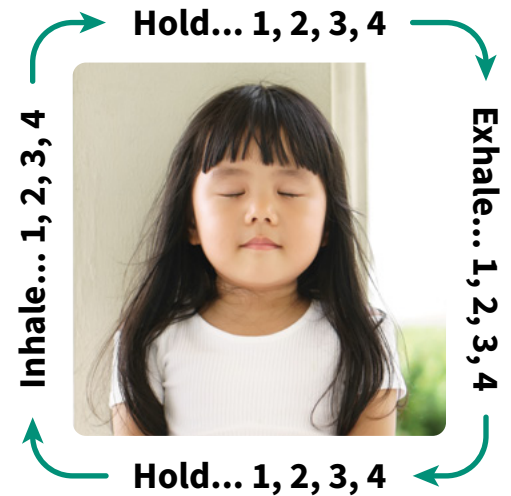
You can build calm and relaxation into the day – your child needs it and so do you. Try lying on the carpet, couch, bed, or in a fort made of sheets, closing the curtains, turning off the lights, and listening to quiet music.

Deep Breathing

Also known as Box Breathing or 4 Square Breathing, this technique uses slow, deep breaths to help with relaxation. You start by exhaling. Then, gently inhale through your nose while counting to 4. Hold your breath for a count of 4. Slowly exhale through your mouth while counting to 4. Hold for 4 again. Repeat 2–3 times.

View these resources to help learn and practise breathing for coping and calming

- [Kids Meditation: Square Breathing](#)
- [4-7-8 Breathing Exercises by GoZen](#)
- [4-7-8 Breathing Exercise to Alleviate Anxiety and Stress for Teens and Adults](#)
- [Coping Skills for Kids: Deep Breathing Exercises for Kids](#)



Yoga/Exercise

Physical movement is a proven strategy for coping in times of stress. Basic exercise can include yoga, walking outside, or online-based exercise programs. Wearing a step counter like a Fitbit may help with tracking physical activity.

There are many online resources and videos for learning and practising basic exercise routines that can be done at home.

- [Yoga for Kids!](#)
- [Yoga Journal: Poses for Kids](#)
- [58 Fun and Easy Yoga Poses for Kids: Printable Posters](#)

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