

Ideas for parents and carers home educating autistic young people during the Coronavirus outbreak – school aged

For many young people with autism completing school work at home represents a significant challenge for a range of reasons; compartmentalisation of home and school, differences in working memory, as well as teachers' expectations not being communicated in an understandable way.

Stress and anxiety is also likely to impact capacity to learn; increasing processing time, impacting cognition and concentration, and increasing sensory sensitivities.

Structuring the day

- Use a visual timetable to provide some structure to the working day. Ensure that the timetable is appropriate for your young person; should it be symbols or written words? Symbols for visual timetables can be found at www.starsteam.org/coronavirus-resources
- Ensure that breaks are very regularly scheduled and represented on the timetable.
- For many young people breaks are most effective when they include some element of movement and thus fulfil sensory needs; bouncing on a trampoline, hoola-hooping, bouncing a large ball, sitting on a space-hopper etc.
- Ensure that the end of the working day is clearly indicated on the timetable.
- Use a wall planner or calendar to record some longer term plans; ensuring that fun activities that your young person can look forward to are recorded.

Structuring the environment

- If possible establish a working area that is separate to play or family areas.
- Try to make the working area a low-arousal environment. Depending on the needs of your young person this might mean ensuring walls and surfaces are uncluttered, ensuring that it is not too bright, choosing an area that is less impacted by noise (for example away from younger siblings)
- Provide a comfortable chair that meets their sensory needs; one with a hard seat if they are under-sensitive to touch or body awareness, one with a soft cushion if they are over-sensitive to touch or body awareness.

- Provide fiddle toys to aid concentration and enable your young person to maintain a calm, alert state, ready to work.

Getting started with work

It is likely that your young person's school will be sending work home for completion.

However don't assume that all work sent must be completed. Teachers may not have had time to consider the SEND needs of all students or individual family circumstances. Don't be too hard on yourself or your young person if only a small amount of what is sent is completed; a little bit is a big achievement in challenging circumstances!

- Accept that your young person is likely to struggle working from home and set easily achievable targets at first. You can increase expectations very gradually, as your young person gets accustomed to working at home. However remember that capacity for work may vary day to day (due to emotional states, amount of sleep or rest etc.) and don't be too disheartened following an unproductive day.
- Break down tasks into easily achievable steps. Give praise and encouragement for each step completed and a small reward and a break following a task completed.
- You may want to use a Steps for Success for recording steps to complete tasks. If possible laminate the sheet so you can wipe and re-use it. A Steps to Success can be found at: www.starsteam.org/coronavirus-resources
- Ensure that your young person knows exactly what they need to do to be finished, e.g. '5 sums', not 'as many sums as you can'.
- If your young person struggles with handwriting or is highly motivated by ICT, enable them to complete the majority of work on the computer or a tablet.
- Give your young person clear guidance regarding where they can access help if they are struggling; emailing a key teacher (with the teacher's permission), emailing or phoning friends, emailing or phoning a relative with a particular skill set?
- Don't feel you need to stick to completing work sent by the school. Set projects that are highly motivating for the young person and play to their individual strengths and areas of interest. For example:
 1. Researching a topic online and creating a presentation or talk for the rest of the family

2. Reading a highly motivating book and reviewing it verbally or in writing
 3. Cooking and baking
 4. Life-skills; laundry, cleaning, shopping online for food etc.
 5. Gardening (potted plants and container gardening if you have no or limited outdoor space), mini-beast hunts, check out <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2020/03/kids-nature-activities-self-isolation/> or www.naturallylearning.co.uk for more fun outdoor learning ideas
 6. Craft or art-based projects
 7. Lego-based projects, see <https://www.legofoundation.com/en/learn-how/knowledge-base/six-bricks/> for fun, educational activities using Lego
 8. Videoing performances to cheer up elderly relatives who are self-isolating
- Give opportunities for your young person to ask questions/share worries about Coronavirus on a 1:1 basis (doing this with siblings may exacerbate anxiety). Resources to support such discussions can be found here: <http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>. If your young person is very distracted by their worries, it may be necessary to schedule this time daily and add it to their timetable.
 - Autistic young people experience significantly higher anxiety than most neuro-typical young people even in familiar situations. It is highly likely that your young person is experiencing exceptionally high anxiety at present. Try working alongside them to create an 'emotional first aid kit' or 'happy box' to use when they are experiencing emotional escalation. It might include things like; a fiddle toy, some images of things that make them happy, some soft fabric perfumed with a favourite smell, some bubble wrap etc.