



Ideas for parents and carers home educating autistic children the Coronavirus outbreak – Early Years

This unprecedented period of change and disruption can very difficult for many autistic children and their families. This will not last forever and there are lots of things you can do that may make things easier for your Autistic child and your family during the current Coronavirus restrictions.

No two Autistic individuals are the same nor are their families which means it can be hard to know which activities, approaches, strategies or systems will be helpful in your specific circumstances. You are not expected to be your child's teacher and should not expect yourself to be, however consideration of the following could be of significant help to your Autistic child, helping them to stay calm and able to engage in the play and learning opportunities available to them at home. Structure makes the world a more predictable, accessible and safer place.

It's important to establish and reinforce self-confidence and self-esteem by building on the child's natural strengths, interests, and abilities. Trying to see the changes, the new routines and activities at home from the child's perspective will help you to understand how to best support them.

Learning activities and the environment need to be calm, visually structured and organised in a way that reduces anxiety and promotes engagement and concentration.

For most young children with autism a change in routine and different expectations re completing school/nursery activities at home represents a significant challenge for a range of reasons; compartmentalisation of home and school/nursery, differences in working memory, as well as expectations not being clearly communicated in a way which is meaningful to them.

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

The Importance of Structure and Routine

We know that for many autistic children unexpected changes and unpredictability can lead to increased levels of anxiety. Clear structure and routines can help children to make sense of an otherwise confusing world.

When considering activities, resources and equipment, use the child's current interests as a starting point, this can help to improve motivation and engagement. It's always helpful to consider how the activity can be structured and how the resources might help to achieve this.

Visual Timetable

Everyone child and family are unique. It's impossible to devise a single timetable of activities that will be suitable for everyone to follow; there are lots of example symbols available on the STARS website www.starsteam.org.uk/Corona-resources which could help with this. The child's setting may have provided you with copies of visuals that they use, we have included lots of additional symbols to represent activities that are likely to happen at home.

- A timetable providing a variety of activities broken down into manageable sessions is vital.
- Parents/carers/guardians are the experts on their child, you will know how many symbols the child needs on their timetable at any time.
- Keep each activity motivating, fun and short; don't have sessions that are too long and become tedious.
- At the end of each activity encourage the child to remove the symbol from the timetable and post it into a 'finished' box/wallet/envelope.
- Have a mix of play and learning activities, life skills activities and sensory activities. These should be interspersed with regular breaks and opportunities for physical activity and movement. This website includes some information and suggestions for sensory circuits that could be done at home. Remember to build in lots of opportunities for fun and relaxation.

Structure the environment

- If completing more focussed learning activities, where possible establish a 'learning' area that is separate to play or family areas.
- Try to make the learning area a low-arousal environment. Depending on the needs of the child this could include ensuring walls and surfaces are uncluttered, ensuring that it is not too bright, choosing an area that is less stimulating (for example away from siblings, the T.V and other distractions)
- Provide comfortable seating that meets their sensory needs; maybe a hard seat if they are under-sensitive to touch or body awareness, a seat with a soft cushion if they are over-sensitive to touch or body awareness, the floor if this is where they are more comfortable.



- If the child needs to fidget allow them to do so, you could also provide fiddle toys to aid concentration and enable them to maintain a calm, alert state, ready to learn.

Getting Started with Learning Activities.

It is likely that your child's school/nursery will be sending learning activities home for completion. However don't assume that all learning activities sent must be completed. Teachers/nursery staff may not have had time to consider the SEND needs of all children or individual family circumstances. Don't be too hard on yourself or your child if only a small amount of what is sent is completed; a little bit is a big achievement in challenging circumstances! The important thing for young children is that they feel safe, loved and happy and that the learning and play opportunities provided for them are motivating and fun.

- Accept that your child is likely to struggle completing more 'formal' learning activities at home and set easily achievable targets at first. If you want to, you can increase expectations very gradually, as your child gets accustomed to learning at home. However remember that capacity for learning may vary day to day (due to emotional states, amount of sleep or rest etc.) and don't be too disheartened following an unproductive or tricky day. Incorporating your child's interests will always make an activity more motivating.
- Break down tasks into easily achievable steps. Give praise and encouragement for each step completed and a small reward and a break following task completed.
- Make sure each learning activity has a clear start and end.
 - It should be clear to the child what needs to be done e.g. completing a puzzle; ordering numbers 1 – 10; building a tower; writing their name; sorting coloured objects etc.
 - Ensure that your child knows exactly what they need to do to be finished, e.g. 'build a tower of ten bricks' rather than 'build as many as you can'.
 - Include only the resources the child needs to complete the activity e.g. If they are sorting colours, just a few of objects of each colour not a whole tray full.
- If your child is highly motivated by ICT, enable them to complete some learning and play activities on the computer or a tablet. Be careful to structure this carefully so that they are not spending all of their time on a 'screen'
- Don't feel you need to stick to completing learning activities sent by the school. Think of ideas and activities that are achievable within your home circumstances, highly

motivating for the child, and play to their individual strengths and areas of interest. For example:

1. Reading a highly motivating story, pointing out familiar characters or objects; watching the same story on YouTube. If you have a printer, print out characters or objects from the story for the child to play with, sort, order etc. Encourage 'mark making' or colouring in characters/objects or cutting them out.
 2. Incorporate the child's sensory preferences in play and learning activities i.e.: Mark making/fine motor activities incorporating the child's sensory preferences e.g. mark making in sand/play dough/shaving foam/paint/rice etc.
 3. Cooking and baking can provide lots of opportunities for taking turns, sharing, listening, following instructions, counting, pouring, mixing, etc.
 4. Life-skills: independent dressing skills (Learning to fasten zips/buttons, putting on shoes/clothes and taking them off); independent washing/teeth brushing; filling the washing machine; making a shopping/ingredients list/ completing shopping lists online for; chopping fruit and vegetables; tidying up their toys 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. Joining in with action rhymes and songs e.g. row, row your boat, heads and shoulders, if you're happy and you know it.
 9. There are many helpful links to early learning activities available, including: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/curations/science-activities> ;
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/alphablocks>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/topics/numeracy>
<https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/>
 10. There are many further ideas and links to learning activities available from the National Autistic Society: <http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources> (click on 'quick guides for parents and professionals' then click on 'Useful Teaching and Activity Resources National Autistic Society Accreditation Team')
- If appropriate, help your child to understand about Coronavirus and the current restrictions using social stories. A variety of example social stories can be found here: <http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>. If your child is very distracted by



their worries, it may be necessary to read the social story daily allowing them time to share their worries.

- Autistic children experience significantly higher anxiety than most neuro-typical children even in familiar situations. It is likely that your child is experiencing higher than usual anxiety at present. Try creating a happy box for them to use when they are experiencing emotional escalation. It might include things like; favourite sensory toys, some images of things that make them happy, some soft fabric perfumed with a favourite smell, a comfort toy. They may also find playing with very familiar toys/activities, familiar family routines, watching a favourite television programme calming and reassuring.