



Disability and the Pandemic

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The Corona virus pandemic has disrupted daily life for most people, but it has completely upended life for children with autism and other disabilities. Depending on the severity of the disability, the pandemic has pushed many parents to their breaking point due to the lack of resources or availability of services.

During the pandemic, many children with disabilities have been unable to have one-on-one or face-to-face meetings with their teachers, therapists or even doctors. This adjustment can be very difficult, challenging, and confusing since children may not understand why there has been a change.

Change is difficult for most of us, but the adjustment can be extreme when it involves an autistic or disabled child, because they rely heavily on schedules and routines to manage their behavior. When very specialized care gives teach special needs children, it is time consuming, it involves repetition and a lot of patience. Unless these techniques have been mastered, it might be tough for the layman or bystanders to understand why the child does not comprehend the change to their usual schedule.

Here are a few suggestions to help children handle the disruptions in their schedules.



1. Talk with children about the pandemic. Even if they haven't asked about it, kids have probably heard someone talk about it. Keep your words simple and let children know that Corona is a germ, and we can stop germs by washing our hands, not touching our face, and keeping our distance from others. Teach children to cough and sneeze into a tissue or a bent elbow. Explain that we are staying home, wearing masks, and limiting social interaction to keep everyone healthy. Teachers, therapists and doctors are doing the same.
2. Re-Create structure and use visuals. Children seek familiarity so attempt to mirror what their normal school/therapy schedule would be. Include breaks, lunch, and physical activities into their new daily routine. When using visuals, place pictures on the schedule showing what children will be doing next. Use a timer for transitioning into another activity so the child knows that something will be changing.



3. Seek social outlets. Even though some children with special needs have difficulties with social communication and interaction, they are likely troubled by the loss of social outlets like school. Face-to-face interactions provide children with opportunities to use their developing social skills. Look for ways to virtually connect with other children and family members even for short conversations. Regular communication (even virtually) may help prevent worsening social anxiety.
4. Make screen time intentional. Electronics can be a positive tool to connect and engage with others. However, too much screen time may lead to inappropriate behavior. The key is to be intentional about how much time and what type of content children are using on a device.
5. Optimize treatment opportunities. Speak with medical providers to see what services are available and if the child is eligible for virtual visits. Some professionals are still seeing patients face-to-face.
6. Try something new. This is a great time to find an easy recipe to make together, even if a child just stirs the ingredients in the bowl. Since we are all limiting outings, this extra time at home can provide unexpected learning opportunities for your child.
7. Don't forget self-care. Plan time for yourself to engage in activities that will replenish your energy and motivation, like talking with friends, engaging in a favorite activity, or getting exercise. Children will pick up on your stress, so remember to take care of yourself, and do things that make you feel good.



Rely on your experience. Offer praise for a job well done yet correct negative behavior. Give the child a chance to re-do negative behavior, and then praise them when it's been corrected. Schedule quiet time for children to reduce sensory input and de-stress. Helping a child to feel "in control" can help them accept the change of routines.

Limit the time you spend watching the news, especially while your child is present. Adults need to know what's happening, but too much is tough on children. It brings added stress to their lives. Stay positive and be kind to yourself. Remember that the most important action is to simply ensure your child feels loved.

Social distancing is recommended, but it may be difficult to social distance with an autistic or disabled child. More often than not, children with delayed development may need assistance with daily activities. The child may not understand why everyone is attempting to stay away from them. Communication is mandatory in these instances. Adults should explain in a gentle way that these changes have nothing to do with the child and are an attempt to keep everyone healthy and free from spreading germs. Use this chance to reinforce frequent hand

washing and coughing into the bent elbow. Remind children that all of this is to prevent the spread of germs. Let them know that their friends, teachers, and doctors are doing exactly what they are doing. This may help children to feel less isolated.

The autistic or disabled child may not have access to certain equipment or resources they normally would have at school or the therapist's office, so it is important to be empathetic to their concerns, discomfort or sometimes pain. Reach out to therapists or other families struggling with the same situations to ask for ideas or suggestions to help improve movements or communications for the child if they are struggling. Instead of focusing on what you don't have, take notice of what you do have. As long as you are helping your child to adjust to the circumstances, you are making a difference to find the "new" normal routine for a while.

Many children may regress during this time. This is expected, and it may create additional challenges. The uncertainty of the pandemic has caused the families of children with special needs to feel concern for their child's future. Staying positive and calm is the best remedy until things return to "normal". Even though you might not have the exact tools to help your child, resiliency is a key. Make do with what you have and plan time for stress relief. Encourage your child to draw their feelings on paper, help them dress themselves, attempt to discover a new food. Get outside and feel the fresh air, take a walk, and take some deep breathes, together.

This is an unprecedented time, but we must do whatever is necessary to ensure our children feel safe. Disabled children might not understand why people are wearing masks. In fact, it might scare them because they can't see anyone's face. Wear a mask around them and let the child wear a mask. Show them a mirror so they can see how they look. It seems so simple, but it's an easy way to reduce children's stress.

Everyone feels added stress during the pandemic, but Covid isn't going away any time soon. It's best to talk about the situation and help children manage their stress in safe ways.



Let go of unreasonable expectations.

There are going to be mistakes. Let the child re-do whatever needs to be done. The children will be happy whether a mistake has been made or not. Stay positive and try not to get frustrated in front of the child when progress is slow or tasks need to be repeated.

Parenting or caring for a child with special needs has its challenges on a good day. During a pandemic, those challenges are increased substantially. With remote learning and limited access to doctors and therapists, a new routine may be required. Change creates stress for everyone, but as a caregiver, you don't have a choice. You need to keep going and find

solutions for the best way to teach your child during the pandemic. Tempers are short when people are locked into their homes without an opportunity to go see friends or families.

The bottom line, be empathetic, show your child unconditional love, create routines, and encourage all children to talk about their feelings. This is new to all of us, so all you can do is your best. Seek help from medical professionals, teachers, and therapists. Remember, no one is judging you, you know your child best, so do what you feel is right.



Resources:

American Psychological Association-Caregivers of Children with Disabilities

ABC News-Front Line, at Home with Special Needs Children

Mayo Clinic-Parenting during a Pandemic

Kids Health-Helping Kids Cope

CDC-People with Disabilities

Children's Health-Support Children with Autism STAT-Life is Difficult.

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