

Coping With COVID-19 –Guidelines for Families of Children with ASD

COVID-19 has brought about a big change in all our lives. While some of us have adjusted or are in the process of adjusting, some others are facing many challenges. Many individuals have seen this as an opportunity to learn new skills and pursued new hobbies. On the other hand many families have also faced enormous difficulties (psychological, social, financial, employment) due to the pandemic.

This is true even in the case of families of children with special needs. Some parents of children with ASD have found positive changes in their child during this period. Parents have seen this as an opportunity to focus more on self-help skills, social communication, and speech skills rather than take their child to schools and therapy centres. Spending more time with the child has helped parents discover more about their abilities. With no tight schedule and being able to stay at home in their comfort space (no new social situation) has helped the children be relaxed and less anxious resulting in reduced negative behaviours and tantrums. This has had a positive effect on the parents as well.

On the other hand some families of children with ASD are still struggling to cope with the situation. It has been extremely challenging for them. Some of the problems faced specifically by parents of children with ASD are given below.

1. Explaining the current situation and details about the pandemic to children.

Explaining the details of any disease a let alone a pandemic situation to children with ASD and language difficulties can be a great challenge. It may also cause excessive anxiety in some children. Thus, parents may have to decide on how much information needs to be revealed to their child based on the child's level of understanding and expected reaction.

2. Challenges due to change in routine.

Changes in routine can affect both children and their families. Children may find it difficult to adjust to the changes in their daily schedules. This leads to new behavioral problems. Family members find it difficult to manage these behavioural problems in addition to other issues they may face like finding a therapy plan, implementing it and keeping the child engaged throughout the day.

3. Having a Structured plan to keep the child engaged indoors throughout the day

While some children have enjoyed the freedom that came with a relaxed routine leading parents to feel that the child does not always require a schedule, other children have found the change in routine very disruptive and miss their old activities. Parents of these children have found it difficult to manage them indoors throughout the day. Many children have also begun to feel isolated in the current circumstances.

A lack of predictability in routine can also increase anxiety in many children leading to behavioural problems like tantrums, aggressive and self-injurious behaviours.

4. Difficulties directly associated with the Pandemic.

Wearing a mask can be very difficult for children with sensory issues. As a result parents are forced to stay indoors with them.

On the other hand some children who understand the situation tend to become very anxious and wear the mask at all times which is not healthy either.

Children find it difficult to understand the concept of social distancing and this becomes difficult when they need to be taken outside.

How can we help?

1. Educate children about Covid-19.

Children with autism may not be able to express their feelings and emotions but they might be aware of what is happening around them. Not having any reassurance from a parent or caregiver could increase fear and frustration in them.

What and how much a child should know about the pandemic must be decided based on the child's age, ability to understand and the impact it is likely to have on them. For that a parent may need to first assess how much the child already knows about it.

It is necessary to explain to the child why they are home at all times and also certain mandatory measures that they need to take like-

- Wear a mask while going out.
- Not go near or touch other people
- Not touch their face.
- Wash hands.

Explaining the current situation to a child with autism is much more difficult and this might require the parent to get creative. Here are some strategies which may help -

- Create a story with drawings and pictures and explain it to them in your own words. Parents must ensure that their child does not hear the news as the information from news channels can be scary and may cause anxiety.
- Social stories are a very effective way to reach them and help them understand the situation and what is expected of them during the same.
- Using more pictures and visual cues while explaining about the situation helps them comprehend better.
- Speaking to the child in a calm and reassuring manner about the situation can help them. This can also help them express their emotions.

2. Create a routine/ structure for the child.

Following a routine helps children with autism feel relaxed and comfortable. Knowing what comes next provides a predictability of the situation which reduces their anxiety and in turn reduces other emotional and behavioural problems.

- Children should have a fixed sleep-wake time, mealtime, screen time, and even other activities in the schedule.
- Children should be a part of creating schedules so that they feel they are in control of a seemingly uncontrollable situation.
- This schedule can be displayed like a to-do list which will help the child transition from one activity to the other.
- Visual schedules can be used for younger children.

The parents must get help from the child's therapist/ teacher to help them take care of the child at home. Parents must train themselves so that they can assist during E-learning sessions as a virtual session may not be as effective as a face to face one. This gap may be bridged by the parent taking the place of the therapist/ teacher.

3. Children must be allowed screen time as a part of their schedule. This will help them stay connected and engaged. But it is important to restrict this to less than 30 minutes in a day and ensure that the screen time is used as a positive learning tool.
4. Parent's must be aware of any changes in the child's sleeping and eating habits or any behavioural problems and report it to the child's health care provider. These could be a sign of fear, anxiety or sadness and may require changes in the current plan.
5. Self-care! Taking care of any child can be challenging and stressful during the current times, but it is much more in the case of a child with ASD. Thus, self-care is extremely important now. Parents must take time out for themselves, keep in touch with friends and family and engage in some activities that help them relax. It is important for the parents to get adequate sleep, nutrition and exercise. The well-being of parents and their being relaxed is very important for the child.

Here is a list of websites we have compiled which may be useful for child/ adolescent with ASD.

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/covid-19-information-and-resources-families#Teaching%20Stories>

<https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome---healthy-parenting>

<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/supporting-children-autism-during-covid-19>

<https://icahn.mssm.edu/research/seaver/resources/covid-19-autism-resources>

<https://www.adventhealth.com/blog/10-fun-activities-kids-special-needs-during-covid-19>

<https://www.hopebridge.com/blog/activities-for-kids-with-autism-during-covid-19>