



Isolation Tips for Families with Special Needs

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Schools and day programs are suspended. Non-essential businesses are told to operate remotely. Families are increasingly advised to limit travel within their communities. As the coronavirus pandemic upends routines, parents are struggling to engage and reassure children and adults with special needs who are stuck at home. Here are tips for introducing structure and a dose of normalcy during this decidedly abnormal time.

Communicate

Start by finding out what your loved one has heard about COVID-19. You may need to clear up misinformation they've gleaned from the internet, TV or their pals.

- Be calm, brief and candid. Provide the necessary information for your child to understand the issues, but be mindful that too much information can be overwhelming.
- Communicate in the way that works best for your child, perhaps using [social stories](#) and pictures. Here's a social story that you may find useful: [What is the Coronavirus?](#)
- Be prepared to reassure your child as she processes the information and asks questions. You can talk, for instance, about what she can do to protect herself—such as handwashing—to give her a sense of personal control.
- Limit TV and other news sources, which may feed anxiety.
- Be alert to behavioral changes that may signal stress.
- If your child is non-verbal, she may not be able to alert you if she begins to feel unwell. You may need to monitor her health conditions more closely than usual.

Adjusting Schedules

Change is hard for us all, but especially for some individuals with special needs. Begin by making small adjustments to your kids' schedules so that they don't feel overwhelmed. Allow extra time for children to adapt. Try using charts, social stories and clocks to explain

how routines will change. Establish a “calm down” routine and reward flexible behavior with a special treat or experience.

Education

While federal law guarantees that students with special needs will continue to have equal access to free, appropriate education during times of crisis, IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) do not specify how that should be accomplished. The U.S. Department of Education has directed that if a child with special needs is unable to attend school because they contract coronavirus, their IEP team must assess the potential benefit of home-based instruction.

In the case of school closings, some districts have responded by giving the equivalent of an extended spring vacation to all students. The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, however, argues that simply closing a school does not exempt it from special education responsibilities.

Other schools have sent home packets of study materials. Still others are experimenting with online teaching. But online teaching may not be an option for many students with special needs, both because their families lack internet connectivity or because their disability makes the use of digital technology impractical.

Parents should be proactive by contacting their special ed director to learn how the school plans to support their child.

Aside from IEP specifics, reading to a child, while encouraging her to talk about the story and illustrations, is a good activity to engage with her and foster learning. Life skills can be improved or maintained by having children—especially older ones—help out around the home. Contact your child’s therapists and other healthcare providers for advice on what you can do to sustain the progress they have made with your child.

Fun, Friends, Family

Fun matters, so here are some ideas for family activities to stave off isolation blues: <https://www.123homeschool4me.com/activities-for-kids-at-home/>.

And stay in touch with those you love. Use email, phone calls and video chats to regularly connect with grandparents, classmates, teachers and family friends. Bookmark important websites, such as your state’s department of health, doctors and local hospitals.

Finally, try to stay calm and patient. This is a unique experience for us all. Here’s a great resource from the University of North Carolina, a COVID-19 toolkit for children with

ASD: <https://ed.unc.edu/2020/03/19/unc-team-creates-online-toolkit-for-those-supporting-individuals-with-autism-during-covid-19-epidemic/>.

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