



AUTISM AMID THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Daniel H. Geschwind, M.D., Ph.D.

As we continue to adjust to the new norm created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we want to shed light on the unique challenges faced by the autism community during this crisis. Changes in routine can be especially difficult for autistic individuals who thrive on structure and repetitionⁱ. We've reviewed the top autism resource sites to create this handy reference with specific guidance on how to get through the Coronavirus pandemic with your autistic child. While there are many mental health tips that will be helpful both for autistic children and typically developing children, our focus here is on information to address the specific special needs of the autism community.

Mask wearing is an essential when going outside as it not only keeps you safe but also those around you. However, this might be difficult for individuals with autism, especially for children and those with sensory needs. The first step to make mask-wearing easier is to model mask-wearing yourself. The more the child sees the mask, the more comfortable they will be later on when wearing it. The use of social stories such as the one provided by Autism Speaks called "We Wear Masks" also helps children understand why masks are important. If met with further resistance, a first-then board ("first we wear the mask, then we get to go to the park") and reward systems ("while wearing the mask, you can use my phone", "you get stickers the longer you wear the mask") are helpful to provide positive initiatives. It is also helpful to allow your child to choose the color or fabric of the mask as this will give them a sense of control over the situation. For children with more severe autism, one might have to help them build tolerance to wear the mask. The following is a step-by-step guide by Autism Speaks to promote mask wearing. Once your child is comfortable with one step, move onto the next:

1. Get them comfortable with just the presence of the mask, whether that means modeling it or putting the mask in plain sight.
2. Have them feel comfortable with the mask touching their face
3. Put the mask around one ear and leave it there
4. Put the mask around both ears *repeat previous steps if met with resistance*
5. Use a visual timer to let them know how long "mask practice" is going to last
6. Set clear expectations and rewards for going out in public
7. Practice multiple times a day

Sources:

https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/We_Wear_Masks_COVID-19.pdf

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1I4BcpTfIk>

How to help your autistic child cope during the pandemic.

Create a sensory space. One coping technique that may be especially helpful for children with autism is setting up a space in your home tailor made for your child to escape sensory overload and create calm. Here are 5 areas to consider in creating your child's sensory space along with a few examples of possible items to includeⁱⁱ.

1. Balance – rocking chairs, swings
2. Vision – pastel colors, bubbles, lava lamps, soft lighting

3. Sound – white noise machines, chimes, nature CDs, calm music
4. Body in Space – weighted blankets, trampolines, squeeze toys, exercise balls, rolling your child in a blanket “burrito”
5. Smell – essential oils, air fresheners

If financial and space limitations are a concern, these strategies can still be used in a variety of ways on various budgets. Even creating a sensory bucket filled with toys or objects that your child finds soothing can be a big help. TheraPutty or Play-doh, for example, may be calming for kids with autism and great items to put in your child’s sensory bucket ⁱⁱⁱ.

Creating an alternate routine for your autistic child to follow during the pandemic.

Mimic your child’s regular school and activity schedule. Experts recommend modifying your child’s typical school routine by maintaining a similar schedule with the same order of activities as a normal school day ^{iv}. Setting times for waking up, schoolwork, lunch, screen time, and bedtime ⁱⁱⁱ will provide a sense of order and predictability and will also ease the transition back into normal school days when schools re-open ^x.

Set-up a dedicated workspace for schoolwork ^{vii}. Children with autism may have trouble applying their academic skills at home. Setting up a specific workspace for school may help minimize distraction and clarify expectations. Consider including a visual to-do list in the workspace using separate folders to identify finished versus incomplete tasks, or a short list of tasks on a sticky note.

Offer your child options in creating the new routine. Autism is a disorder of social communication. Keeping your child actively involved in creating their own schedule can help them practice expressing their interests and make them more willing to carry it out. Giving your child a choice in something as simple as which route to walk may improve their communication skills and also reduce anxiety ^{vii}.

Highlight silver linings. This is an excellent time for children with autism to learn new skills. Practicing typing, cooking, or sign language, for example, can be a great way for your child to benefit from this time during the pandemic. Building in more physical activity is another potential benefit ^x. Not only is exercise good for physical health, it also reduces anxiety ^{vii}. In fact, there is an app available on tablets called Exercise Buddy that provides an autism-friendly exercise system to help increase physical activity. They currently offer a special 3-month free trial for users during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, try taking advantage of extra “screen time” by incorporating fun online resources from the Los Angeles Public Library to make children more excited about schoolwork at home ^v.

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/covid-19-information-and-resources-families>

How to minimize regression of your autistic child’s skills during the pandemic.

Many parents have valid concerns about regression or loss of skills while everyone is staying at home, including our valuable teachers and behaviorists. While autism support services may not be widely available in person, telehealth is now more available than ever. Remote access to behavioral services like ABA is available at many agencies and clinics. Definitely contact your child’s care providers to ask about parent training through video chat or over the phone to help you work toward treatment goals at home.^{vi} Additionally, the Autism Response Team (888-AUTISM2), local Family Resource Centers, and LA County’s Community Resource Advisors (2-1-1) can help connect you with a variety of autism service information.

In addition, the Autism Genetics and Human Diversity Project at UCLA is currently investigating genetic risk for autism in the African American community in order to increase racial diversity in autism research. By

participating in this study, African American families who suspect their child has autism can receive a free assessment by trained autism specialists to determine if a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is appropriate. The study can also help families whose child has already been diagnosed with ASD by providing basic recommendations based on the autism specialist assessment. In addition, all participating families will gain access to educational resources and future research opportunities through the UCLA Center for Autism Research and Treatment (CART).

For more information about the Autism Genetics and Human Diversity Project, contact (310) 794 - 4090 or AutismGenetics@ucla.edu.

Thank you to Dr. Erin Graham, Nina Sheridan, Joyce Wu, and Tara Foroughi for their work in drafting this informational document. DHG

Daniel H. Geschwind, M.D., Ph.D. is the Director of the Center for Autism Research and Treatment, the Gordon and Virginia MacDonald Distinguished Professor in Neurology, Psychiatry and Human Genetics, and the Senior Associate Dean and Associate Vice Chancellor for Precision Health at the University of California, Los Angeles.

ⁱTorres, E. (2020, March 22). Social distancing ‘not possible’ for people with disabilities, raising challenges. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com>

ⁱⁱRudy, L. J. (2019, August 17). How to create a sensory room for your autistic child. *Verywell Health*. Retrieved from <https://verywellhealth.com>

ⁱⁱⁱBarnett, R. (2020, March 18). COVID19: How to help children with autism adjust during self-isolation (T. Cody, Interviewer) [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.wtsp.com>

^{iv}How to cope with disrupted family routines during COVID-19. (2020, March 20). *Autism Speaks*. Retrieved from <https://autismspeaks.org>

^vSpinner, J. (2020, March 17). Helping autistic kids cope with the chaos and uncertainty of coronavirus. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

^{vi}How to handle clinical care during social distancing and school/program closures. (2020, March 17). *Autism Speaks*. Retrieved from <https://autismspeaks.org>
