**Supporting children and young people with Autism**

These are challenging times. Many of us are suddenly, and without warning, having to live our lives in very different ways, with disruptions to our routines being unavoidable. While most of us have enough flexibility to adapt to these changes, children with Autism are likely to find this much more difficult. They may be more worried than usual, and possibly feeling overwhelmed and confused. The following pointers are aimed at helping you to help young people with Autism, focusing particularly on the following areas:

* **Communication**
* **Structure and routine**
* **Getting things done!**
* **Supporting wellbeing**

**Communication**

Children with Autism can get confused by language, both by the amount we use, and the words we choose. It can also take them longer to ‘hear’ and respond to what you have said. Simple tips for speaking to a young person with Autism:

* **Prompt** them to listen before you start to speak (e.g. move to where they can see you, say their name)
* Say **less** and say it **slowly**
* Use **specific key words**, repeating them and stressing them as you go.
* Give **very clear instructions** that are unlikely to be misunderstood (e.g. ‘Owen put your shoes on’, not, ‘we need our shoes on before we go out’).
* Avoid using words such as ‘always’ and ‘never’, as these can be difficult to go back on (e.g. ‘we will usually go for a walk’, rather than ‘we will go for a walk every day’).
* **Provide visuals** to go with what you are saying (e.g. pictures, photos, writing something down, showing a finished example). A whiteboard can help with this if you have one. If the young person uses PECS, or other visual ways of communicating, school may be able to provide you with copies of what they are currently using.
* **Allow time** for the young person to ask questions in whichever way they are comfortable (e.g. writing things down, showing you something, drawing).
* Wherever possible, give them **time to think** about what you have asked or said to them.
* **Check** their understanding as you go along, but don’t ask too many questions as this can be overwhelming.

*Communication resources*

There is a lot to talk about with and explain to young people at the moment. The following links are resources designed to help children with Autism to **understand coronavirus**.

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/coronavirus-story-for-children/>

<https://theautismeducator.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Corona-Virus-Free-Printable-Updated-2-The-Autism-Educator-.pdf>

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf?fbclid=IwAR23zxNlbEumpw4oKlM7Xy3VlKnA25b8Gi53N6YiFIeKB9Vx0LQypSPYzzg>

This helps to explain the 2m **social distancing rule**.

<http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Screen-Shot-2020-03-26-at-08.54.29.png>

This helps to encourage children to **wash their hands** for longer.

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ELEPHANT-HAND-WASHING-2.pdf>

This helps with young people who have sensory issues relating to hand washing.

https://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/News/8821506

These resources use **very few words** to try and explain the following:

[Handwashing](Autism%20corona%20resources/Washing%20hands%20sequence.pdf)

[Staying in the house](Autism%20corona%20resources/Staying%20in%20the%20house.pdf)

[Staying in your room](Autism%20corona%20resources/Staying%20in%20your%20room.pdf)

[Are you feeling poorly?](Autism%20corona%20resources/Are%20you%20feeling%20poorly.pdf)

**Structure and routine**

Children with Autism often prefer to have structure to their day because it makes life more **predictable**. Predictable is reassuring, which in turn can be **calming**. At school, children have a lot of structure and there is a clear difference between home and school. This is much harder to achieve when you are at home all the time, especially if you have other children to look after. Nobody expects parents to be able to do all of the below, but it might be helpful to give some of them a try.

* Have **a visual timetable** for each day. This doesn’t need to be complicated. A rainbow example is here <http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Inspiration-links-and-activites-for-creating-structure-to-the-day-.pdf>
  + The young person may be more familiar with ones that look like this <https://images.twinkl.co.uk/tw1n/image/private/t_630_eco/image_repo/66/07/t-s-152-individuals-visual-timetable-template_ver_2.jpg>
  + Here are some examples of ‘**traditional’ symbols** to put onto the timetable (remember, a full day’s teaching is not expected. Please adapt the symbols, and have fun).
  + <http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/stay-at-home-visuals-.pdf>
  + You can ask the young person to draw or take photos of pictures for their timetable to make it even more meaningful to them.
* Have a **set area** for doing ‘tasks/jobs/learning’. This doesn’t need to be a big area, but having a separate space will help to keep the idea of ‘tasks/jobs/learning’, and ‘free/choosing time’ separate.
* Have certain clothes to wear for ‘tasks/jobs/learning’ times. **Almost like a uniform**. Again, this helps to keep things separate.
* Create a **den or chill-out space** so they can have some down time. Encourage them to help create it so it is motivating for them.
* Try and keep the **weekends different**, and replicate as much of your normal weekend routine as possible. This will keep them in the pattern of week/weekend that they know, and hopefully support the transition back to school.

**Getting things done!**

Be kind to yourself. You probably aren’t a teacher. Or if you are, you almost certainly aren’t your child’s teacher. You are not expected to teach the curriculum to your child during the school closures. If, however, you or your child want to do a structured learning activity, then you could try and use some of the tips below:

* If the young person finds it **difficult to follow an adult instruction,** use a Now and Next board, like this one:
  + <http://www.autismsocialstories.com/now.html>
  + You can write or draw what is happening now, and what will happen next.
* If the young person finds it hard to **work through a task**, it can be helpful to break the task you want them to do into small stages, and to reward them for completing each stage (e.g. a piece of Lego for each stage, which they can play with at the end of the task). Match the reward to whatever motivates your child, but keep the rewards manageable and sustainable.
* Use a **timer/stopwatch** to mark out ‘tasks/jobs/learning’ and ‘free/choosing’ activities.
* If the young person finds a **particular activity challenging** and you can’t avoid it, consider doing it after a calming activity (e.g. visual-spatial/sensory task, see suggestions below), and with something motivating following it.

**Supporting wellbeing**

Young people with Autism will benefit from general approaches and resources designed to support wellbeing and anxiety; please see separate advice from the EPS. They do, however, often have additional stressors and risk factors, which may require a more specialist approach. The following tips and suggestions are meant as an add-on to general advice.

* By providing **structure and predictability**, and thinking about how you **communicate** with a young person with Autism, you will already be helping to support their wellbeing.
* Young people with Autism can struggle with **anxious thoughts and feelings**. Just being prepared and on the lookout for this is really helpful. Specialist advice around managing anxious behaviour in young people with Autism can be found here:

[http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PDF-updated-Anxiety- Article.pdf](http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PDF-updated-Anxiety-%20Article.pdf)

* Young people with Autism can struggle to **go outside and be active**, especially if they are feeling worried or overwhelmed. Building in some time for exercise is hard at the moment, but things such as yoga or a gentle walk can make a real difference. Try and build these into a routine. Walking the dog or playing with an animal can be part of that routine. Some yoga links are here: https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/kids>
* **Limit the amount of news** the young person watches. Overexposure can be problematic and young people with Autism can get quite fixated with a particular idea/pattern of thought.
* Provide **visual-spatial activities** for the young person (e.g. puzzles, Lego, Sudoku, colouring, Meccano, magnetic balls/shapes, Sticklebricks). These types of activities tend to be calming as the brain focuses on putting things together rather than verbal or emotionally demanding tasks. Offering these activities will help everybody to feel grounded and calm.
* Take advantage of the young person’s **special interests** by setting up a project to do together (e.g. scrapbook, animation). If they don’t have a special interest, try and set up a fun project that might appeal to their previous interests.
* Be aware that the young person might be struggling with the **increased social demands** of being at home with parents/carers/siblings, as well as additional Facetime/Zoom/Whatsapp etc. chats with relatives. It would be good to allow the child access to a **quiet area** or den regularly throughout the day, and to pre-plan and forewarn them of any video calls they may be expected to join in with.

For young people with Autism, processing the information they receive through their various different senses (e.g. sound, vision) can be overwhelming and confusing. This can lead to them either seeking extra input from one or more sense or avoiding sensory information from one or more sense, or they may even have a complicated mixture of responses that seems to change. Trying to meet the **sensory needs** of the young person can play a really important role in supporting their wellbeing and helping them focus.

* **Speak to school staff** about the young person’s sensory needs,
* Build in **regular time** for sensory activities. These should be aimed at the young person’s particular interests, needs and motivators. Staff at the young person’s school may have some specific ideas about what works, but some general links are below:
  + <https://inclusiveteach.com/2020/03/20/150-sensory-learning-ideas/>
  + <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/2f48mlkqn0ylgiz/AADgTFXcby2aHw1E085-KJ6Pa/Home%20learing%20pack?dl=0&subfolder_nav_tracking=1>
* Be aware that for some young people, sensory information (noise, lighting, movement, taste, etc.) is very difficult to process/deal with. These young people benefit from having a **place to withdraw to** that is calm and non-stimulating. Having this available for the young person throughout the day, and encouraging them to notice when they need it, will build up the young person’s self-awareness and coping strategies.
* Allow **stimming** (self-stimulating behaviour e.g. humming, rocking) if this helps the young person to feel calm. If the stimming is self-injurious in nature, then talk to the teachers in school to work towards a coordinated plan that keeps them safe.
* Be aware that the young person may seem to want/need more **screen time** than usual. This can be a very calming sensory experience for young people with Autism. With careful parental controls, and clear structures around duration and frequency that work for the family, this can be helpful for everyone. Speak to school for ideas about resources that the child might already be familiar with using.