



Author: [Nicole Kreiser Wells, PhD](#)

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Helping Children with Autism Cope During a Pandemic

All children are currently coping with uncertainty while experiencing abrupt changes to routine and the loss of daily connections to teachers, friends, and extended family due to the spread of the new coronavirus.

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may have a harder time coping with these stressors. ASD can affect a child's behavior, social, and communication skills. It can make it difficult for them to comprehend and process what's happening to themselves and others, particularly during stressful times.

Children with autism may struggle with understanding information about COVID-19 that's presented on the news, on social media, and during family conversations. They may also have a hard time communicating their concerns or asking questions, especially if they're stressed or confused. They may also become easily frustrated during this time because it can be difficult for them to understand and convey their emotions to others. Additionally, as many parents of children with autism know, changes to schedule and routines often trigger increased frustration, anxiety, and disruptive behaviors.

During times of stress and uncertainty, such as the pandemic today, children need extra support from their caregivers. Parents of children with ASD may find the following strategies and teaching tools helpful as they navigate this challenging time.

[Use clear language and visuals to communicate.](#)

This strategy can help children understand COVID-19, new expectations, and changes to their routines. Try using social narratives with simple visual aids to clarify the situation and offer guidance and new "rules" on specific actions or behaviors. Such stories can explain the virus, illustrate social distancing and hand washing rules, and set new expectations, such as the need to use videoconferencing for school and therapies.

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Create structure and new routines.

Loosely structure the schedule for “school days” around your child’s normal school day routine. Maintain consistent sleep and wake routines. Use a visual schedule with pictures for each activity to structure the day. Balance structured activities with unstructured ones including incorporation of school subjects, household chores to work on daily living skills, and family-based social activities.

Seek out support and help.

Email or call your child’s teachers and therapy providers to get help with setting up a daily schedule and implementing techniques to work on behavioral challenges. Teachers and providers may be able to offer web-based sessions or support, and recurring visits to check in, if needed.

Monitor your child’s mental health.

If you notice signs of anxiety or depression such as changes in sleeping or eating patterns, increases in repetitive behaviors, excessive worry or rumination, increased agitation or irritability, or decreases in self-care, seek out additional support from a mental health provider or your pediatrician. Many mental health and non-urgent medical providers are currently providing services via telehealth.

Prioritize your own self-care.

Try to be patient and realistic with your child and yourself as you adapt to your new schedule and routine. Juggling the demands of remote work or lack of employment, distance learning, childcare, and managing a household can impact your mental and physical health and the dynamics of your household. Remember to schedule breaks – for everyone – throughout the day. Schedule time each day to do something that recharges you: meditation or prayer, calling a friend, engaging in a favorite hobby, or another activity that helps you feel better.