



# Supporting your child's learning at home

## **The goal**

During the current coronavirus situation many of our children will be at home once more. Others maybe at school due to a parent being a Keyworker or your child is vulnerable.

Our highest priority is the well-being of your child and your family. We will aim to support you to manage your child's anxiety at this time, as well as to help you engage your child in learning opportunities while they need to be at home.

## **The priority is your child's well-being**

Ongoing learning and skills development is important for your child, but their overall well-being is more important. No child can learn effectively if their anxiety is too high, so it is important that the focus lies in bringing this anxiety down.

During the current coronavirus situation, it is likely that many children will be affected by heightened anxiety, not only because of the worrying events themselves, but because of the constant changes in routines and lifestyle that the developing situation is bringing into their life every day.

Given this, please do not feel you need to pressure your child into engaging in learning for a set amount of time each day. Focus on their well-being. Ultimately, this will help your child become ready for learning naturally and create a better, more relaxed environment for learning at home.

## **Supporting learning and skills development at home: potential challenges**

We are aware there will be many challenges to engaging your child in learning while at home. The first challenge is the heightened anxiety that everyone, including your child, is experiencing at this time. It will be hard for your child to focus and learn when if they feel – or sense that you are - unsettled and worried.

You may face challenges if your child struggles with concept of completing what they see as 'schoolwork' at home. In addition, your child's routine may completely change: the normal routine of going to school each day may abruptly end and the structure to each day be lost. We would expect many autistic children to struggle to adjust to these changes, simply because they are 'changes'.

Finally, you may have work/activities sent from school which your child could complete, but how do you motivate them to complete them when the xbox or other preferred activity is calling?!! Your school will aim to provide you with support for these issues, do not feel you are alone at any point.

## **Supporting learning and skills development at home: expectations.**

Remember the goal is to support your child to manage their anxiety during the difficult coronavirus situation, and learn and develop skills where possible.

## ***Develop a tool kit of strategies to manage anxiety***

In practice, many of these skills may centre on *learning strategies to manage anxiety during difficult and changing times*. These are valuable life skills that your child will need throughout life. Please be explicit with your child about what strategies you are using to manage their



# Supporting your child's learning at home

anxiety and why, talking through what you are doing (using visuals and their preferred mode of communication). The more your child learns about how to manage their well-being, the better. We will aim to send more information around anxiety in the coming weeks.

## ***Think about practical life skill opportunities***

Learning at home may also involve far more practical and (equally important) *life skills* such as cooking, washing clothes, gardening etc. While all of this learning may look very different to the more traditional numeracy and literacy skills, they are none the less important for many autistic children. Use visuals and encourage active participation wherever possible.

## ***School will provide learning activity ideas***

Of course, where additional, more traditional learning can take place that is valuable too. Teachers will be providing guidelines in learning opportunities for young people. But do not feel pressured to keeping your child to a strict regime of core subjects during time at home *if this is creating too much anxiety or stress*. Your child is far more likely to progress successfully and have a better sense of well-being if the focus is relaxed to suit them, in the unusual environment we are finding ourselves in. If you are struggling to engage your child in more formal learning, focus on developing strategies for anxiety and life skills instead.

**Consider keeping a record of all of the activities in each of these 3 areas that you and your child manage to complete. Develop a reward system, and see how far you can get!**

## **10 top tips for successful engagement of children in learning at home**

- 1. Start by establishing a clear narrative for your child of why everything is different right now and why they are not going to school.***

However much or little your child is told about the current coronavirus situation they will be very aware of the sudden changes in their routine and of the fear and worry in adults around them. If they are not given a narrative of why this is happening they will feel frightened and fearful of what might happen next. Provide a cognitively appropriate narrative of *why* they need to be at home right now. Lead with something concrete. It will help the child feel in control and less anxious. Try the social stories available on NAS website: <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>



# Supporting your child's learning at home

## 2. *Create a new space at home for learning.*

Many autistic children will struggle with the idea of carrying out activities they associate with 'school' while they are at home. For some it may be impossible. If all attempts to carry out more traditional learning at home leads to high anxiety and meltdowns focus instead (or for a while) on more traditional 'home' activities such as cooking, gardening etc and drawing on the implicit learning opportunities that can be found in these (e.g. counting, weighing, researching ideas, life skills generally...). Follow your instincts on what works for your child.

For other children learning at home may be much more possible if you work with them to create a new space in the home that is going to represent 'school'. It may be part of the house they do not normally use, a different desk, a specific corner of a room. It may be under a table if that works for them! A picture of school may be put up in it. Allow the child to personalise as much as they want. Stress that it is 'the school area'. It is important to spend some time on this, it may help make schoolwork at home possible for your child.

## 3. *Create new routines.*

Routines and structure bring comfort and security.

Many routines will have been suddenly removed by the coronavirus situation, so new ones need to be created. Agree a new timetable of when the 'school hours' will be and how they will be structured (if this is helpful) in a special timetable. Your child's input in this is paramount – it will be more successful if the timetable is agreed with them, rather than imposed *on* them. The focus should be on quality of time rather than quantity!

It will be helpful to create new routines as part of this timetable. This could be the same activity at the same time each day, and/or the same type of activity in the same order. This will all help to reduce your child's anxiety at a time when in the external world, everything seems to be constantly changing. Visual supports emphasising these routines will be important, as will setting times for activities that your child is used to having free access to at home e.g. Xbox. Use 'now-next' boards to help your child process one task at a time.

Warning! The first few days of new routines may be hard, until they become familiar. Don't give up, but don't put too much pressure on your child either. Building up to a full timetable may be helpful – consider a visual to support this (see additional resources)



# Supporting your child's learning at home

## 4. ***Make a list of what is staying the same as school, and what is going to be different. Structure 'worry time' if needed.***

Find creative ways to list all the things that your child will still do/see/eat at home, even though they are not at school etc.

This may include seeing friends or teachers (on zoom / teams). It may include favourite subjects, or less popular ones! Consider co-creating 'rules for school at home' to help with this. Consider also allowing your child create rules you need to follow while they are engaging in school work at home! They may tell you or show you that they find it difficult when you try and support them in a certain way.

Consider creating a 'worry board' for specific worries about actual and possible changes (e.g. 'catching the virus', not seeing friends, getting behind on work, not being able to engage in a specific activity etc). Allocate a time (e.g. 20 minutes) when these worries are addressed, and put the worries away at other times. Parents/carers may like their own worry board! (See additional resources).

## 5. ***Give the child choice and control.***

Anxiety levels may be very high, and your child may be feeling very out of control in the current crisis. It can help with this if you offer your child choices over anything they *can* control e.g. snack options, soft toy companion options, what part of the house to study in, what type of exercise at break options. Use visual supports to help choice making where appropriate.

Your child may also benefit from an 'exit card' for time out similar to those used in school for when their anxiety gets too high (and anxiety is to be expected at this time when the child is facing constant changes as coronavirus situation develops). If your child's anxiety reaches a peak they may need some time out. It doesn't mean they are 'getting out of an activity they do not like, as the activity will be there when they come back (unless they are having a particular problem with it and you judge that it needs to be removed). It is helpful to use a timer to indicate '5minutes time out' etc. but your child should have the option to ask for another 5 minutes etc if they still feel too anxious. This is ok.

Do not feel under too much pressure to have your child sat working for too long– it may be too much some days for your child in the current situation, and learning to self-regulate is a valuable skill too. If a period of 'time out' (however long it needs to be) leads to your child feeling better (perhaps indicated on zones of regulation visual for example) this should be praised and celebrated. It is a valuable life skill, and you can share this success with school.



# Supporting your child's learning at home

The alternative – which could be trying to ‘power through’ and experiencing a day of stress and anxiety for all of you with possible meltdowns – will involve no learning at all. It may even prevent learning for many days to follow.

## 6. *Use special interests.*

We know that for many autistic children, time spent on special, intense, interests can be powerful coping mechanisms. They can reduce anxiety, increase well-being and – crucially – increase engagement in school work too. They are also fun!

Find creative ways to bring special interests into your child's learning, using their interests as a focus for research, for maths puzzles, pieces of writing, reading – anything!! Whatever your child's interest, bring it in! For those who love Minecraft, Microsoft has made some of its educational Minecraft games freely available online as schools close worldwide amid the coronavirus pandemic. See <https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/marketplace>

## 7. *Create a good sensory environment, avoid too many demands and build in time for sensory regulation.*

Wherever your child is working there should be minimal clutter, and the noise, visual environment, odour, textures should suit their sensory needs. Use natural light where possible. This is important or they will struggle to engage.

Avoid your child being overloaded with too many demands – try and keep it one task at a time. Use checklists, and now-next boards to keep a steady order (see additional resources).

Be sure to provide your child with any sensory aids that help them feel calm and ready to learn e.g. fiddle toys. Follow sensory diets at home as far as you can. Sensory needs can go up at times of stress so follow guidance from OTs.

## 8. *Remember behaviours are communication!*

Behaviour is communication, so do listen very carefully to what your child's behaviour may be communicating at this time.

Many autistic children struggle to express their fears and worries whether verbal or not, and no child can learn effectively if they are overwhelmed with worry. Focus on the well-being of your child first and try to offer a low arousal approach. Do not feel pressurised into persuading your child into completing vast amounts of school work at the expense of



# Supporting your child's learning at home

their (or your!) well-being. If a child is expressing anxiety and stress, then the focus should be alleviating that anxiety and stress (and thus reducing the need for the behaviour).

## 9. **Clear support from school.**

Use the links you have with school for help, advice and support, do not feel that you are on your own with this. Celebrate your successes with school too!

## 10. **Encourage with rewards and have fun!**

Have fun with their child while they are learning – this will maximise their chances of learning and reduce stress all round. Focus less on what your child's learning 'looks like' and more on what it 'feels like' to both of you. It should be positive.

Rewards are key. They need to be meaningful for your child, sustainable, and very achievable. It should not be possible for your child to 'lose' rewards they have gained. Focus on what motivates your child – you know them best. Some children can help decide what a reward or motivator could be.

***Keeping to a structure and routine that benefits your child, and incorporating special interests and the unique opportunities of the home environment, have the potential to make home learning fun and unique. It does not have to be formal! It does not have to 'look' like school. It can be as unique as your child and most importantly should be fun!***

