

How Parents Can Help Children with Autism Navigate the “New Normal” of At-Home Learning

With the current outbreak of COVID-19, parents are adjusting their home-lives and work-lives to what we now call the “new normal.” But for students on the autism spectrum, nothing feels normal about this change. And yet, it is so important that parents and educators join together to help diffuse the disruption. Together, that’s exactly what we’re accomplishing as we help learning continue.

Many students like the ones in my care at Y.A.L.E. School have had to adapt to a rapid change to remote education, which we implemented in response to the current guidelines from the state of New Jersey. Here are a few tactics that I often suggest to parents and guardians to help students with autism make the learn-at-home transition.

Keep Calm and Carry On

Easier said than done. When crisis strikes, it’s normal to feel anxious, but individuals on the spectrum can be especially sensitive to emotional stress and changes in his or her physical environment. Keep your child as calm as possible by herding rowdy younger siblings into quiet activities to carve out as much individual support for your youngster with autism as possible during learning times. Encourage others in the house, especially teens, to minimize the sound on electronic devices to avoid sensory issues and distractions. Consider having serious adult conversations in private. As the news cycle continues to buzz with updates, move to another room to watch or listen.

Communication is Key

During a crisis, national and local officials will provide strict guidelines that may impact daily life. How you communicate these changes to your child is critical. Plan ahead to select the words or visuals that convey the necessary information in a reassuring way. For an individual on the spectrum, details may be better left unsaid – make essential points without overemphasizing actions that may promote unhealthy fixations or difficulties later. Handwashing in normal times can be a difficult enough. Adding fun, rather than fear to the process is a far better strategy.

Stay Connected

As always in times of emergency, establish nearby supports should you need them. With social distancing recommendations in place, it is still good to know that family or friends are available to help in a timely way, especially if someone in the family needs to visit the doctor. Daily check-ins with those close to you can also dispel the uncomfortable sense of isolation that accompany times such as these. And especially remember that your child’s teacher is your very own mentor for answering questions, providing instructional ideas and supports, and helping to alleviate your concerns. Having this full “resource group” will create a support system for you and your child.

Rule by Routine

Routine is a well-known cornerstone of comfort for individuals with autism. Stay as consistent with your student's schedule as possible by maintaining the same bedtime and wake-up routine, preparing meals at expected times and keeping school hours, shortened accordingly. Staying on schedule and creating new opportunities to learn and grow will help to pave the way for the return to school.