



EFFECTIVE SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM PARTICIPATING IN REMOTE LEARNING – 1/13/21

Presenter: Erin Briley, M.S., NCSP, Mountain Plains MHTTC Technical Trainer

Remote Learning Supports for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Individuals with ASD tend to have difficulty adapting to change, which is further complicated with difficulties understanding and using language as well as understanding abstract concepts. Therefore, those with ASD require additional supports to comprehend and adapt to current circumstances as well as instill predictability to create structure and reduce anxiety.

Explain Current Circumstances

- Reassure and normalize fears by using clear and concise concrete language.
- Use social narratives & visual supports to teach rules such as social distancing
- Provide methods of expression such as bullet or video journals, art activities, etc.³

Teach Coping Skills^{2,4}

1. Body Techniques: Progressive Muscle Relaxation, belly breathing, blowing pinwheels, rocking in a rocking chair, swinging, squeeze balls, etc.
 2. Mind Techniques: Relaxing imagery, coloring, journaling, singing, listening to music, counting to X
 3. Combination Techniques: Yoga, Tai Chi
- Use visual supports to demonstrate and cue
 - Use concise, concrete language (e.g., “expand your stomach like a balloon” vs “breathe in the light”)
 - Build into daily routine and visual schedule strategically (e.g., before math if math is a trigger)
 - Increase during the first few weeks of change. Be attentive to triggers and signs of anxiety/depression. Consult with a specialist as needed.

Regulate Behavior by Accommodating for Sensory Needs¹

Emotional and behavioral regulation is required to be effective learners.

- Provide calming areas and designated areas for movement seeking
- For hyper-sensitivities, consider weighted blankets, body socks, bean bags, dimmed lights, sunglasses to block overhead lighting, noise-cancelling headphones, blanket forts. Request permission before touching. Provide a calming area with comfy pillows, stuffed animals, etc.
- For movement seeking, consider mini trampolines, wobble seats, kinetic sand, stability balls to sit on, chewies and fidget toys, opportunities to swing or rock, providing firm pressure, weighted blankets
- Implement a regularly scheduled exercise routine.



Increase Physical Structure

- Provide clear physical and visual boundaries for different areas of purpose such as work areas and break areas. Use tape, bookshelves, carpet, etc. to distinguish between these areas
- Provide “to-do” lists or folders/bins assigned for “to-do” and “done” tasks
- Minimize auditory and visual distractions
- Keep materials out of view when not in use
- Clearly label materials and place in the order in which they should be used

Establish Routines

Routines make settings predictable and assist by helping to understand expectations.

- Use the same routine as school if possible and pair with a visual schedule.
- Consider using the same visual schedules, communication tools, and work materials used at school.
- Create clearly stated rules and post in a place easily seen. Use no more than 3-5 rules and phrase positively (“to do” versus “can’t do”)
- Some caregivers will benefit from a video showing how to assist and support learning.

Visual Supports

- Use visual schedules to inform of what activities will occur and in what sequence. This helps make abstract concepts concrete and environments more predictable. Include sleep/wake routines, chores/daily living tasks, breaks, days off, and fun activities.
- Incorporate impending changes into schedule and prep in advance. Review each morning and review for the next day the day prior.
- Use social narratives, which are brief descriptors of social situations which clarify the situation and provide appropriate behavioral expectations. They also provide information as to the thoughts and feelings of others involved.

Social Connections²

- While direct engagement is always preferable, individuals with ASD should be encouraged to keep up with social connections via other modalities.
- Plan in time to connect with others via virtual meeting platforms, online social groups, telehealth, socially engaged gaming, etc., but vary the methods used.
- Teach rules of virtual social engagement using visual supports and role-play as needed.

Back to School Preparations

- Prep in advance to the plan to return to school.
- Use social narratives to prep for new school routines and protocols related to the pandemic (e.g., rules for masks, social distancing, etc.)
- Show a video of school staff wearing masks and engaging in expected protocols
- Arrange a video chat between student and teacher
- Provide a walk-through prior to returning to school
- Use visual countdowns for days remaining before school starts and add to visual schedule



References

1. Autism Speaks (2020). Sensory Issues. Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sensory-issues>
2. Hume, K., Waters, V., Sam, A., Steinbrenner, J., Perkins, Y., Dees, B., Tomaszewski, B., Rentschler, L., Szendrey, S., McIntyre, N., White, M., Nowell, S., & Odom, S. (2020). *Supporting individuals with autism through uncertain times*. Chapel Hill, NC: School of Education and Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved from: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>
3. Lynch, C.(2019, June 03) Relaxation Training for Kids on the Autism Spectrum. 5 Essential Modifications. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/autism-and-anxiety/201906/relaxation-training-kids-the-autism-spectrum>



This document was prepared for the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Mountain Plains MHTTC) under a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). All material appearing in this document, except that taken directly from copyrighted sources, is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from SAMHSA or the authors. Citation of the source is appreciated. Do not reproduce or distribute this document for a fee without specific, written authorization from the Mountain Plains MHTTC. For more information on obtaining copies of this document, please email: swinfield@wiche.edu.

At the time of this publication, Meena Vythilingam served as SAMHSA Acting Assistant Secretary. The opinions expressed herein are the views of Erin Briley and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), or SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this document is intended or should be inferred.

The work of the Mountain Plains MHTTC is supported by grant H79SM081792 from the Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.