

So the schools have closed. Now what?!

During this time of unprecedented public health crisis the Government has made the decision to close the schools. We can all see how this will help to fight the virus, but it does leave you as parents in a bit of a difficult situation. What can you do to support your young people with autism, preserve some of your sanity and maybe manage to do a bit of your own work at the same time?

We are all feeling anxious with everything that's going on at the moment and the changes which have happened to society in such a short period of time. For our autistic young people these feelings are further exaggerated. Here are some of the reasons why:

- Their whole routine has changed overnight.
- There is a lack of certainty over what is going to happen next and when their routines will return to normal.
- The worry that we all feel will be being communicated to them, through seeing or hearing news being broadcast, and through our conversations with others.
- They are now expected to do school work at home!

This help sheet is designed to help you, as a parent, to cope with the current situation, and to be able to manage your child's anxiety, maybe even giving you ways to enable them to do some constructive activities! It's quite a long read, so here is a summary of the sections you to help you find what you might be looking for.

- **Structure**
 - Visual timetable
 - Whoops
 - Don't try to make it like school
 - Repetition
 - Visuals
 - Flexibility
- **Social understanding**
 - Social stories
 - Comic Strip Conversations
- **Sensory needs**
 - Sensory activities
 - Online resources
- **Anxiety**
 - Suggested relaxation activities
- **Learning**
 - Use structure
 - Use their interests
 - TEACCH – structured independent work
 - Social Learning

Many of these areas already have help-sheets associated with them, which can be found on our website – www.freeoutreach.org.uk/resources

Structure

People with autism benefit from structure. It provides a sense of certainty when the world feels very uncertain. There are various ways of putting structure in place at home, and how you do it depends what works in your house and for your child.

Visual timetable

Most people with autism benefit from having a visual timetable to show them what is going to happen over the next period of time. This could be as short as a now and next board, showing the next two activities, a half- or whole-day timetable, or a whole week's plan laid out for them. You could use photographs, pictures or symbols printed from the internet (or the ones included with this resource) or words, depending on what works for your child.



Some children will need the timetable to be set for them and remain the same if at all possible. Others will need to be included in the planning process, given choices about what they want to do.

Whoops



No matter how hard we try, plans will sometimes have to change. This can be hard for children with ASD, but thinking ahead and using a visual can help them to cope when this happens. A *whoops* symbol can be added to the timetable when you know something will have to change. It's a humorous way of flagging that something will be different. You could make a visual using their favourite character to help relieve anxiety – I love this one showing Homer Simpson!



Don't try to make it like school

Some structure is important, but please resist the temptation to try to make the next 12 weeks (or however long it ends up being) like school. Once all the transitional times, social times, group work, paired work, interventions and lesson inputs are taken into account, the amount of focussed *working* time your children engage in at school is far lower than you might think. Don't think that you're going to get them to work for 6 hours – this would be at least double the focussed time *any* child achieves during the school day. Instead, structure a few short and motivating 'learning activities', and then use activities that they usually enjoy at home to fill the time, but in a structured way.

Repetition

Don't worry if your child is repeating tasks over and over; a lot of our young people need repetition to imbed learning. Doing new and different things every day does not necessarily mean that they will be learning more.

Visuals

Your child's school may have provided you with copies of the visuals they use at school, or they may not (there are some visual resources accompanying this help-sheet if you'd like to use them). But many children will struggle with using the same visuals from school in the home environment. They may, however, like to make their own to fit the activities they're likely to use. These could be written on scraps of paper, designed on the computer and printed, photographed and printed off, drawn beautifully or scribbled on post it notes. They could be laminated for longevity, but don't worry if you don't have a laminator – you may just have to re-write them a little more often.

Velcro is also unnecessary, but many people have Blutac at home which could be helpful to make the visuals stay where you want them. Whatever works for you is fine.

Flexibility

While structure is needed, some children will need to feel as though they have some control of what is a very strange situation. You could try giving them a blank timetable and a list of the things they need to do, allowing them to select what happens when. Or a now and next board and a choosing board. You remain in charge because you choose what goes on the list of options, but your child feels a sense of control.

Go to

<https://freemantlesoutreach.org.uk/Resources/Independence-and-Learning/> for resources giving further support in using these strategies.

Daily Timetable	
before 8am	Get up Breakfast Medicine Clear table Clean teeth Get dressed 10 minutes life skills PHONE OFF, TV OFF
8am	
9.30	
10am	
10.30	
11am	
11.30	
12pm	Lunchtime Movement break Mindful message PHONE OFF, TV OFF
1pm	
1.30	
2pm	
2.30	
3pm	
3.30	
4pm	Tidy up School's out!

You can choose how to fit the activities into your day, but remember...

- Each thing occurs the number of times it is written on the list below.
- If you miss something today it must be the first activity on tomorrow's plan.
- Different activities will take different amounts of time.
- On some days Mummy will edit the things on the list.

Maths activity (30 min)

Literacy activity (30 min)

Times Tables Rockstars (15 min)

Read Theory (15 min)

Reading (30 min)

RE activity (30 min)

Instrument practise (30 min)

Per week:

- Ukulele 1 2
- Trumpet 1 2
- Recorder 1 2

Screen time

Choosing

Choosing

Life skills

Dog walk

Social Understanding

Your children will be receiving lots of information which they will struggle to process. We are all in this position, but this will be magnified for a child with ASD, who does not have the social understanding to put all they are hearing into context.

Social Stories

Social Stories are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. They are used to help fill the gaps which someone with ASD might have in their understanding of that situation, event or activity. Social Stories have been written to support children with understanding the Corona Virus situation and to help teach thorough hand washing. These can be found at <https://www.freeoutreach.org.uk/News/COVID-19-resources/>

Comic Strip Conversations

This strategy involves using stick figures and cartoon symbols to visually draw what you are talking about and to encourage young people to make guesses about the thoughts and motivations of other people. It could be a helpful way of exploring how your child feels about the situation, or talking through the changes they can see in society.

For help sheets on *Social Stories* and *Comic Strip Conversations* as well as lots of other resources please see <https://www.freeoutreach.org.uk/Resources/Social-and-Emotional/>

Sensory needs

Almost everyone who has ASD experiences some sort of difference in the way they process sensory information. You may notice that your child struggles to filter out information, or over reacts to many small stimuli when they are feeling over-responsive. If your child is under-responsive they might appear not to react to normal stimuli, requiring prompts to follow instructions and spending a lot of time in their own world. In order to help the body with sensory regulation we often suggest *heavy work* activities. These are activities which enable you to feel your joints and muscles, such as weight bearing, climbing, pushing and pulling activities.

If you have a garden it would be good to get your child outside regularly. Maybe try incorporating challenges, or allowing them to choose from a selection of ideas for activities (as suggested above). Here is a list of ideas:

- Star jumps
- Jumping on a trampoline
- Crawling under objects (cushions? blankets? a tunnel?)
- Wall or chair push ups
- Animal Crawls (can you crawl like a bear? crab? frog? seal?)
- Ball Pass (Stand back to back and pass a ball by turning to the side in one direction, than reverse)
- Climbing (trees? climbing frame?)
- Leaping on a crash mat/mattress/pile of cushions
- Popcorn jumps (jumping from a squat position and then landing back in a squat position)
- Wheelbarrow walking
- Obstacle course
- Bouncing on a gym ball
- Dancing to music
- Swinging
- Skipping
- Running
- Going outside for a walk or hike (once per day, while keeping social distance from anyone not in your household)
- Lifting light weights (tins of beans?)
- Yoga moves

If you don't have a garden, or your child is reluctant to go outside, lots of these activities could be carried out in the house. There are also many online resources which you could access at home. Three of my favourites are:

- Joe Wicks (The Body Coach), who is presenting a free PE lesson each day during the corona virus crisis - <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAxW1XT0iEJo0TYIRfn6rYQ>
- GoNoodle (<https://www.gonoodle.com/good-energy-at-home-kids-games-and-videos/>) which has masses of content aimed at calming children down, using up their excess energy or energising them, depending on which activity you choose, and is free to use at home.
- Cosmic Kids Yoga - <https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>

Some sensory-related help sheets, including one on heavy work, are available at <https://freemantlesoutreach.org.uk/Resources/Sensory/>

Anxiety

Apart from the general sources of anxiety which we are all experiencing at the moment, your child also has their ASD to contend with. It is very common for children with ASD to experience higher levels of anxiety than the rest of the population, so if you are feeling anxious at the moment, imagine how they are feeling! The strategies and approaches suggested above are some of the usual ways in which we help to reduce anxiety in those with ASD, so getting some of this in place will really help.

Many children with ASD live their lives in a state of high anxiety, and may not know what being relaxed feels like or how to achieve it. Teaching different strategies while someone is in a good place may be necessary in order for them to know how to access them when they are feeling stressed and anxious. We have a help sheet dedicated to teaching relaxation on our website. To find it please go to <https://freemantlesoutreach.org.uk/Resources/Social-and-Emotional/>. A summary of some of the ideas is below:

- Help your child recognise their emotions. A visual emotions scale such as *The Incredible Five Point Scale* can be helpful. There is an FAQ sheet on this topic on our website.
- Breathing techniques. There's another help sheet on these!
- Exercise
- Sensory activities
- Massage and squeezes
- Art/creative activities
- Mindfulness. Younger children may like to listen to *Peace Out* on YouTube, but there are lots of other examples.
- Make a book of Happy Thoughts, or take pictures of happy memories or successes to look through when feeling upset or anxious.

Learning

Try not to worry too much about the learning your child is missing due to the school closures. All the children are in the same situation. Keeping everyone safe and looking after the mental health of your family is the biggest priority. Although most schools are sending work home for children to do, many children will find it difficult to cope with the concept of carrying out things which would usually be class tasks in their home environment.

Nobody will judge you for how much academic learning your child does and doesn't do during this time!

Here are some ideas to try to make learning more manageable and motivating:

Use structure

As described above structure will help to reduce anxiety for a child with ASD by helping them to understand what is going to happen and what is expected of them. This will be helpful whether you are planning fun activities or more academic tasks. Don't forget to allow for flexibility if your child requires it. Other elements of structure could include a task board – breaking an activity down into written or pictorial steps to help a child know what they need to do in order to complete it.

Use their interests

It is the key learning objective or skill which is important in any learning task, rather than the topic or context used to teach it. If your child is resisting writing instructions for how to make their bed (an actual thing my daughter was asked to do!) maybe they could write instructions for how to plant seeds, bake a cake or play their favourite game. The key learning is around writing instructions, not the making of the bed.

If your child is resistant to doing any work at all, they may be willing to start a research project about their special interest. Would they make a PowerPoint about Ferraris to send to their teacher? Or go on a bug hunt and make a photo diary to sequence the animals they found? You may need to be inventive!

TEACCH

If your child is very prompt dependent, waiting to be told what to do before attempting anything themselves, you may benefit from setting up some structured independent tasks. These are activities which are well within the child's ability, and which they feel safe having a go at themselves. Maybe you could gather a box containing their favourite jigsaws, a matching game they still love, some simple dot to dot sheets or similar activities. Try to teach your child to work through two or three activities by themselves, before taking a break. To help with this it would be great if you are able to make a schedule to show which activities they are going to do before stopping. They can repeat the same activities multiple times, before you start swapping in other tasks which you may have been practising with them at other times.

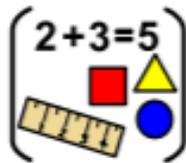
Social Learning

Not all of the learning that your child does at school is academic. Social learning is also a critical part of their development. Imagine an adult who had a university degree, but couldn't share or take turns – they would not do well in the world of work! There is a lot that you can do at home to practice social skills, such as;

- Playing board or card games – agree on the rules at the start and stick to them!
- Get your child involved in sharing out food, or toys like Lego or playdough, so that everyone in the family has some
- Get involved with their play – this could be anything from a simple turn taking game like throwing a ball to each other, or getting involved with their imaginative dramatic creations!
- Do surveys around the family such as finding out who is everyone's favourite super hero, or favourite song
- Telephone or video call relatives and friends who are also at home. You could ring just for a chat, or organise to meet up online and play a game like Pictionary or charades!

ABC

English



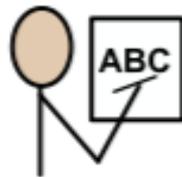
Maths



PE



Colouring



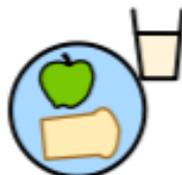
Spellings



Flashcards



Break



Lunch



Reading



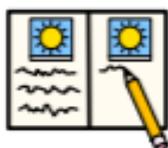
Bug club



Break



Task work



Journal of day



Time



Activity



9:00



9:30



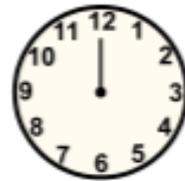
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11:00



12:00



1:00



1:30



2:00



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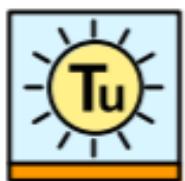
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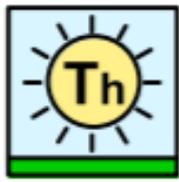
Monday



Tuesday



Wednesday



Thursday



Friday

