UNC Frank Porter Graham
Child Development Institute
Autism Team

Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times

Kara Hume, Ph.D., UNC School of Education, & UNC FPG Autism Team:
Victoria Waters, Ann Sam, Jessica Steinbrenner, Yolanda Perkins, Becky Dees, Brianne Tomaszewski, Lindsay Rentschler, Susan Szendrey, Nancy McIntyre, Mary White, Sallie Nowell, & Sam Odom

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All children and young adults require support from caregivers during times of stress and uncertainty, such as those we are facing now with the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Coping with the unknown and navigating school closures, abrupt changes in routines, loss of connections with teachers and friends, and fear around contracting the virus- are burdens for all, and caregivers play an important role in helping children and young adults understand the changes and process their related feelings. Individuals with autism may need additional support to process the news and adapt to the many changes. This population may face additional challenges related to comprehension, communication, difficulty understanding

7 Strategies to Support Individuals with ASD through Uncertain Times

Support understanding

Offer opportunities for expression

Prioritize coping and calming skills

Maintain routines

Build new routines

Foster connections (from a distance)

Be aware of changing behaviors

abstract language, an insistence on sameness, and a greater likelihood of anxiety and depression—all of which may be exacerbated during this stressful period.

The following **7 support strategies** are designed to meet the unique needs of individuals with autism during this period of uncertainty. In addition, examples and ready-made resources are included to help caregivers implement these strategies quickly and easily. These materials purposely represent a variety of styles/designs/complexity to model the range of what may be most meaningful across ages and skills, and to demonstrate what can be generated with few materials by busy caregivers. Specific adaptations and additions may be necessary to best meet the varied needs of individual children and young adults.

These strategies are intended to be a menu or toolkit of ideas that may be helpful-- caregivers may take one idea at a time and find a way to make it work for their child(ren) with autism and their family. Caregivers may want to start with a strategy they have used in the past, or perhaps find a tool to address the issue that is creating the most immediate stress. Consider involving the individual with autism in the decision-making process about what tools would be most helpful.

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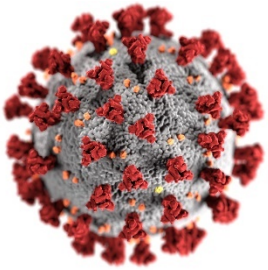
Support Understanding

Individuals with autism may have varied levels of understanding about the COVID-19 virus, how it spreads, and how to reduce risk of exposure. Below are several strategies to use to provide additional meaning to this complex scenario.

Describe the virus and current situation (e.g. closures, social distancing) in concrete language and terms and avoid flowery or abstract phrasing. The understanding of abstract phrases and metaphors such as "she is under the weather", "she caught the virus", and "he is scared stiff about this" can be difficult for individuals with autism and can create confusion (Lipsky, 2013). Using direct and clear language is recommended. Though stark-sounding, phrases like "The coronavirus is a type of germ. These germs are very tiny, and when they get inside your body, they can make you sick" may be easier for individuals with autism to understand. For more information, (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/10-tips-for-talking-about-covid-19-with-your-kids).



Use a **social narrative**, a story that clarifies a situation and possible responses through modified text, photos, or the use of technology (Wong et al., 2014). Individuals on the autism spectrum benefit from receiving information in multiple formats, as they often have receptive language deficits (Mody et al., 2013). Several example social narratives have been developed to give individuals more information about COVID-19, help them understand how to reduce risk, provide insight into how they may be feeling, and offer assurance that those feelings are normal. Reading the narratives to/with the individual with autism regularly across several days is helpful. Revisit and adjust as needed as circumstances shift.

Provide **visual supports** to offer guidance on coronavirus specific actions and behaviors. The "rules" around how we greet people (e.g. no more handshakes), how we interact with people, even family members (e.g. social distancing), and how often/when we wash our hands (e.g. every time we come inside) are changing. Using

visual cues to break down the steps of these new expectations may be helpful, as individuals with autism may respond best to a more explicit and concrete explanation. Several examples are provided.

Offering **visual cues to clarify the passage of time** may be helpful. Individuals with autism may have trouble perceiving the passage of time, an invisible concept, and the use of a monthly, weekly, and/or daily calendar may aid in tracking time out of school/in a quarantine situation. While we do not know an "end" date to today's uncertainty, marking the passage of time as well as including favorite activities, such as shows, online meetups, or game night on the calendar can be a helpful coping strategy.

Resources include:

Social Narrative: COVID-19
Social Narrative: Coronavirus
Social Narrative: Greeting People
Social Narrative: Giving People Space (Social Distancing)
Social Narrative: Giving People Space When Talking
Visual Support: Hand Washing (Clipart)
Visual Support: Hand Washing (Photos)
Task Analysis: Hand Washing
Creating Visual Supports and Social Narrative Apps
Visual Support: Calendar Template
Visual Support: Countdown Example
Visual Support: Timer (Using Stickie Notes)
Timer Apps

COVID-19

Right now, lots of people are getting sick with a virus.

Doctors and leaders are working hard to keep everyone

healthy. I need to help keep myself safe and healthy too.

School is closed so students and teachers can stay

healthy. While school is closed, it is important for

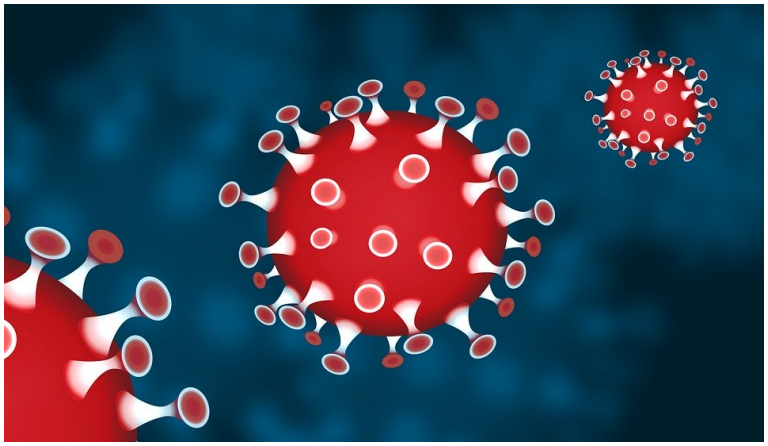
everyone to stay home and not visit other people. While I

am at home, I can play, look at books, and learn. I also

need to wash my hands a lot with soap and water. This

will help keep me and my family healthy.

Coronavirus – COVID-19



Right now, there is a virus that is making people sick. Because it spreads so quickly, many schools and workplaces are closed. It is important to keep myself and others healthy right now, so I need to change some of my routines. Staying home and staying away from other people will help keep me and others healthy. I also need to wash my hands often and keep my hands to myself.

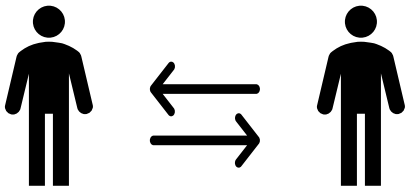
Doctors and leaders are doing their best to take care of sick people. If I am worried about the virus, I can talk to my parents. I will do my best to stay healthy.

Greeting People

When I meet new people, I like to shake their hand. When I see people that I know, I like to hug them. Some people do not like to touch when they greet others. They may feel sick and do not want to share germs. They may not be comfortable with touching others. When I greet people, I should ask if they are okay with shaking hands or hugging. If they say no, I can wave and just say hi. Asking before shaking hands or hugging, will make everyone feel more comfortable.

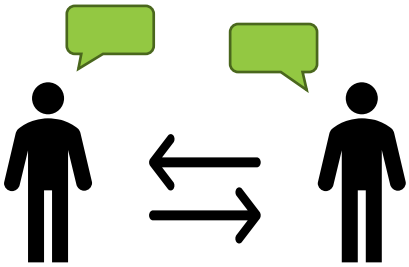
Giving People Space

All people need to have personal space.

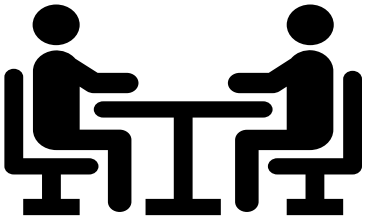


Being too close can make people feel uncomfortable.

When I talk to people, I should give them space.



When I sit with people, I should give them space.

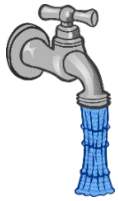
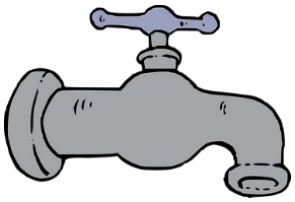


Giving people personal space, keeps them happy and healthy.

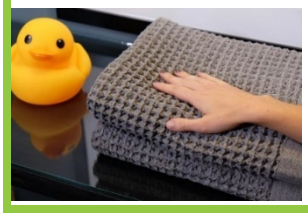
Giving People Space When Talking

I like to talk to my friends and family. Sometimes I stand or sit very close to them when I am talking. When I do this, the other person may feel mad or unsafe. People like to have some space when they are talking to others. When I talk to my friends and family, I can stand or sit at least an arm's distance away. Giving people space when I talk will make them happy.

Hand Washing

	Step 1. Turn on warm water
	Step 2. Get hands wet
	Step 3. Get soap
	Step 4. Rub hands for 20 seconds
	Step 5. Rinse hands
	Step 6. Turn water off
	Step 7. Dry hands

Hand Washing

	Step 1. Turn on warm water
	Step 2. Get hands wet
	Step 3. Get soap
	Step 4. Rub hands for 20 seconds
	Step 5. Rinse hands
	Step 6. Turn water off
	Step 7. Dry hands

Hand Washing

1. Turn on warm water
2. Get hands wet
3. Get soap
4. Rub hands for 20 seconds
5. Rinse hands
6. Turn water off
7. Dry hands

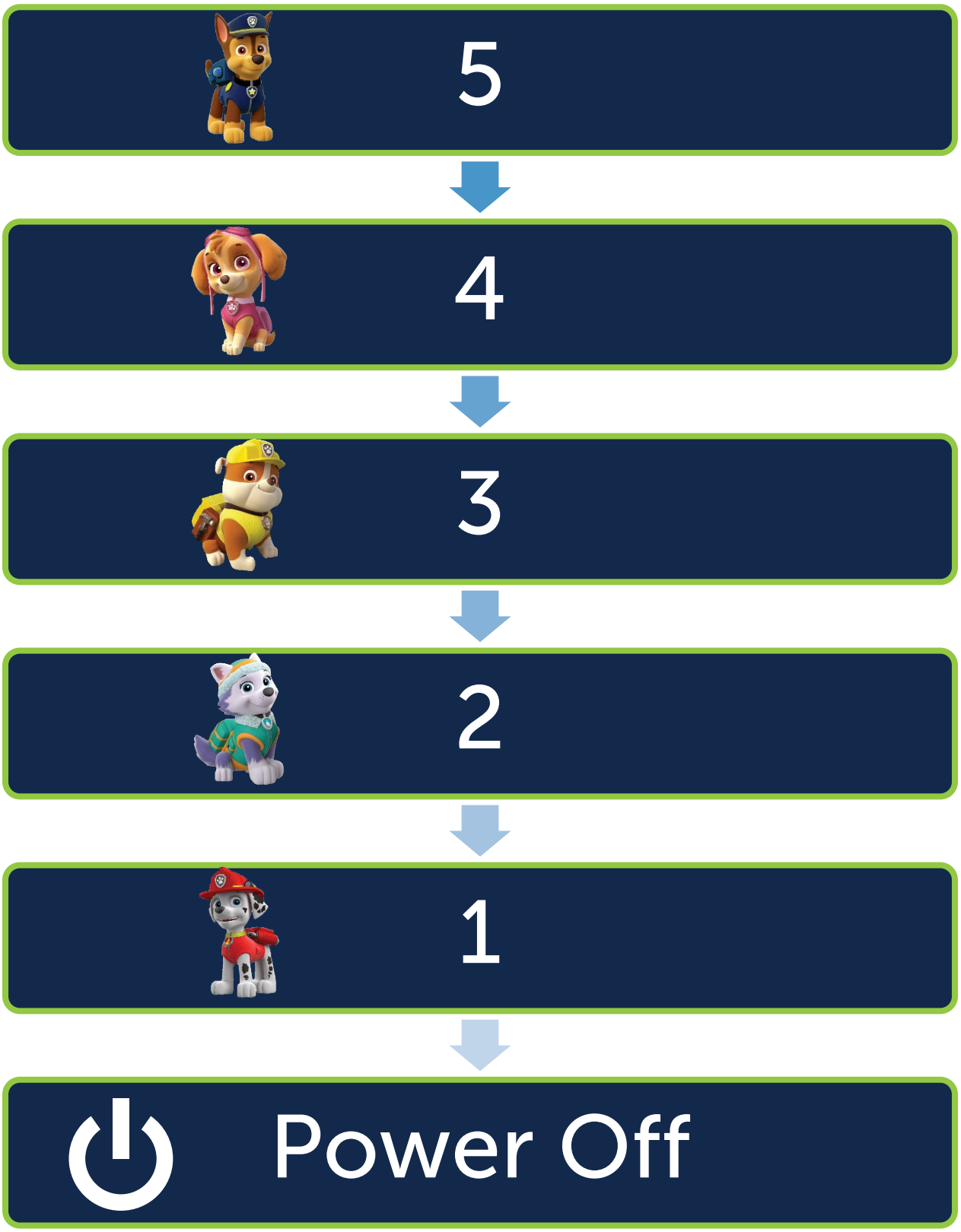
Creating Visual Supports and Social Narrative Apps

First Then Visual Schedule $9.99	Pictello $18.99	iPrompts $9.99
iCreate Free (in-app $)	Social Story Creator & Library Free (in-app $)	First Then Free

Calendar Template

S	M	T	W	T	F	S

Countdown Example



Visual Timer Using Stickie Notes

Timer Apps

Childrens Countdown Timer Free (in-app $)	Visual Timer Free (in-app $)	Stopwatch Timer Free (in-app $)
Kids Timer+ $0.99	Stopwatch & Timer+ $4.49	Tabata Timer $2.00

Offer Opportunities for Expression

Children and young adults will likely have difficulty articulately expressing how they feel about the many unexpected changes. Fear, frustration, and worry may be expressed through challenging behavior like tantrums, refusing to take part in family activities, or withdrawal. For individuals with autism, these communication difficulties may be coupled with expressive communication delays, limited verbal or nonverbal skills, difficulty perspective taking, and/or social communication deficits.

Consider providing multiple opportunities for family members to express their feelings as they are able—through family and individual discussions, writing activities, movie making, or play. Feelings and needs may be communicated through alternate forms of expression such as the use of augmentative and alternative communication (e.g. iPad, pictures), listening or playing music, dance, yoga, and various visual art forms. In addition, recognize that an increase in challenging behaviors may be an expression of anxiety or fear, and consider if support strategies in place are adequate (see strategy 3 for further discussion of coping and calming strategies). Several examples are provided that can support expressive communication.

Resources include:

Communication Tools
Expression Activities

Communication Tools

1 Second Everyday Video Journal Free (in-app $)	Pinterest Ideas for Bullet Journals and Zines Free
Zine Making 101 Free	StoryboardThat Online Comic Maker $7.99-$9.99 a month
LiveJournal Video Journal Free-$19.95	Journey Video Journal $4.99

Expression Activities

Journaling

Create a daily routine

Create a bullet journal:

- One line a day
- Integrate images
- Calming tips
- Things that bring happiness
- Track mood
- Take a daily fun photo and describe what is happening

Video journal:

- Film 1 second daily
- Interview, talk about plans, mood…

Art

Create a Zine (pronounced zeen):

- A mixture of collage, art, and words
- Visit Zine Making 101 for ideas and tips
- Share what you know about your favorite topics
- Create a 'How to'

Create a graphic novel or comic strip:

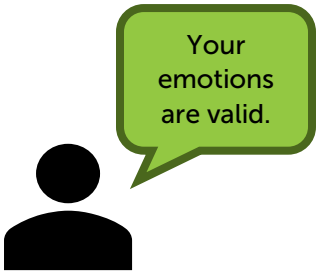
- What do you miss?
- What are you worried about?
- What are your hopes?

Prioritize Coping and Calming Skills

Supporting individuals with autism to learn coping, self-management, and self-care skills is a priority during this time of uncertainty.

Ideally, individuals with autism have some **coping and calming strategies** in their repertoire of skills to access with support during their most anxious times. These may include rocking in a rocking chair, listening to music on headphones, deep breathing, watching a preferred video clip, brief periods of vigorous exercise, or accessing a favorite activity or material. If coping or calming strategies are not yet part of the routine, caregivers can prioritize the teaching of these skills during this time of uncertainty.

- Strategically choose times of the day when the individual with autism is calm to initiate the instruction.
- Create a concrete and visual routine to support the use of these strategies.
    - Many free apps are available for calming strategies and guided meditations such as Calm, Headspace, Breathe2Relax, Pacifica, and RainRain. Several examples of calming routines and self-management systems are provided.
- Ensure that the individual with autism has ample access to these calming activities.
- Coping/calming activities may be scheduled regularly across the day in the initial weeks of changes, then, if appropriate, caregivers may introduce and teach a **self-management plan** that helps individuals track their anxious or worried responses and identify when the calming strategies are required.



Exercise/physical activity is a proven strategy to reduce anxiety symptoms with the broader population, as well as with individuals with autism. Consider establishing or adding basic exercise routines for the family such

as wearing a FitBit and counting daily steps, a nightly walk, or an online/app-based workout. Many sites are offering free access during this time, such as the Down Dog yoga app, Nike Run Club, and Facebook Live streams from Planet Fitness.

Resources include:

Self-Management: Calming Routine
Self-Management: FACE COVID
Self-Management: Reinforcement
Inside and Outside Exercise Activities Choice Board
Exercise Activities
Mindfulness Apps

Calming Routine

1. Take 4 deep breaths

2. Clench fists 4 times

3. Count to 10

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Good job!

FACE COVID

Focus on what you can control
Say to yourself "I can control what I am doing here and now."

Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
Silently and kindly acknowledge any thoughts and feelings

Come back into your body
Slowly stretch your arms or neck, shrug your shoulders
Take slow, deep breaths

Engage in what you are doing
Notice 5 things you can see, 3 things you can hear, 1 thing you can smell, and what you are doing

Repeat the above 2 to 3 times

Commit to action
What can you do this week to help yourself? Or others?
Write it down in your schedule.

Open up
Acknowledge that your feelings are normal and that it is okay to feel what you are feeling

Values
How do you want to treat yourself? Others? Values include love, humor, kindness, honesty…

Identify resources
Identify 'Who' and 'Where' to get help, assistance, and support

Disinfect and distance
Wash your hands and practice social distancing

(Adapted from Rush Harris, 'The Happiness Trap' and 'I'm Learning ACT')

Self-Management

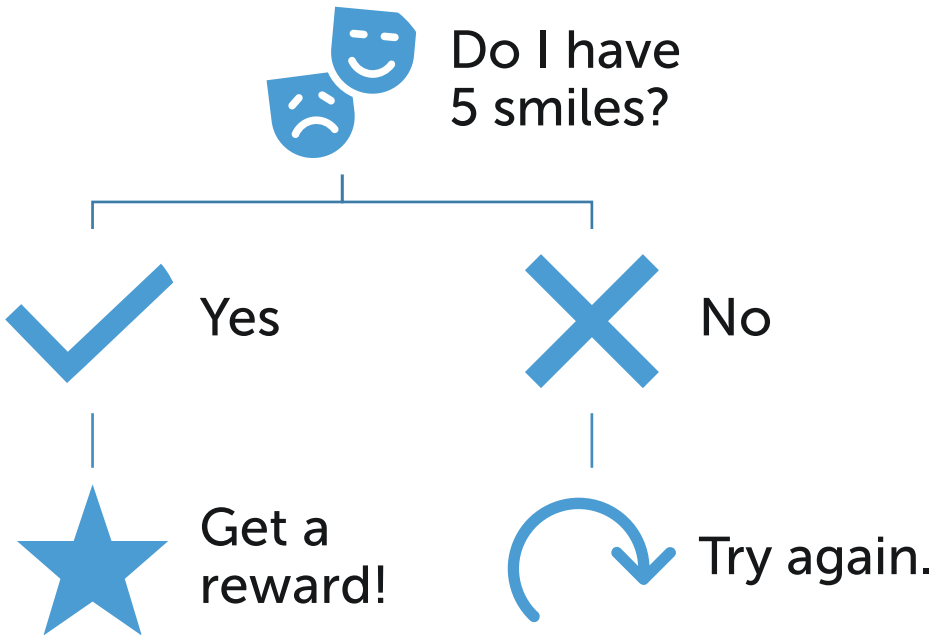
Directions:

At the end of each of the 5-time intervals, circle whether you practiced the target behavior/skill. After the fifth or last time interval, determine if you get a reward.

Target Behavior/Skill:

1	2	3	4	5
☺ ☹	☺ ☹	☺ ☹	☺ ☹	☺ ☹

How many smiles do I have?



Do I get a reward?

(Adapted from AFIRM Module: Self-Management)

Exercise Activities Choice Board

Inside	Outside
Lift weights	Play ball
Dance	Yard work
Climb stairs	Take a walk
Yoga	Go on a nature hike

Exercise Activities

Inside	Outside
Use food items (e.g., cans) or cleaning supplies as weights	Take a walk or ride a bike
Learn a dance from YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, or GoNoodle...or freestyle to your favorite songs	Gardening or yard work
Do heavy work like carrying heavy items up and down stairs	Go on a nature scavenger hunt
Try yoga or animal poses/walks like crab walks, bear walks, frog jumps...	Play catch or jump rope

Mindfulness Apps

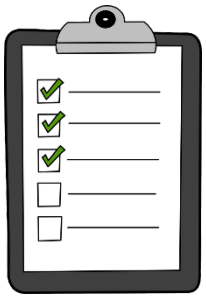
Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame Free	Calm Free (in-app $)	Daniel Tiger's Grr-ific Feelings $2.99
Headspace Free (in-app $)	HelloMind Free (in-app $)	Mindfulness for Children App $5.99

Maintain Routines

While it is important to create time and space for all family members to process uncertainty, **individuals with autism may cope best when daily routines are only minimally interrupted**. Routines can provide increased comfort for individuals with autism (Faherty, 2008) and may allow them to better express their feelings related to the changes. For example, instead of skipping a Friday night movie tradition because of increased screen time at other times during the week, choose a movie that can facilitate a conversation about the changes, loss, and/or associated feelings (e.g. *Inside Out, Finding Dory*). Combining the stress of the COVID-19 related changes with the addition of changed routines--especially if the new activities are nebulous or unstructured--could potentially exasperate or extend the adjustment process (Lipsky, 2013). Important routines to maintain include:

Sleep/wake routines: Maintaining physical health is key for all family members and ensuring proper sleep is an important contributor. Sleep disturbances are more common in individuals with autism, thus extra attention may be required to support good sleep hygiene and maintain bedtime and waking routines (see more https://www.autismspeaks.org/sleep).

Household chores/daily living skills: Taking part in structured household chores and routines is a recommended strategy to support children and young adults coping with stress related to COVID-19. Individuals with autism may need additional supports, such as a **task analysis**, to be able to take part in and/or complete these activities. Several examples are provided for common chores along with a template that can be used for a variety of daily living activities. For more information related to COVID-19, see https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf.



Expanding the use of a **visual schedule**, and using one more regularly throughout the day, may help facilitate participation in activities at home and reduce anxiety. Many

caregivers use elements of a visual schedule already (e.g. a calendar on the refrigerator, a list of errand locations, a photo of which therapist is coming to visit) and these can be extended for use across the day. The format and length of the schedule may vary based on the individual's needs, and several examples are included.

Resources include:

Tips for Creating Task Analyses
Task Analysis: Unload the Dishwasher
Task Analysis: Make a Snack
Task Analysis Template

Tips for Creating a Task Analysis

1. Choose a task with a definitive start and end (e.g. set the table, get dressed, make bed)

2. Write down the steps as you do the task or as you watch another adult do the task

3. Give the steps to someone else to try to follow and make sure they are clear.

4. Write the final steps on a piece of paper to guide instruction for teaching the task to your son/daughter.

5. If needed, draw, or take picture cues for each step to post as a visual schedule for your child to reference.

6. Teach the task using the prompting strategy that fits your child best. Some learners who get easily frustrated may do best with most-to-least prompting in which you assist more, while other learners may reach independence with the task more quickly using a least-to-most prompting strategy.

Most-to Least Prompting	Least-to-Most Prompting
Full Physical	Visual Prompt
Partial Physical	Verbal Prompt
Modeling	Gestural Prompt
Gestural Prompt	Modeling
Verbal Prompt	Partial Physical
Visual Prompt	Full Physical

Unload the Dishwasher

Target Steps Date					
1. Open dishwasher					
2. Pull out bottom rack					
3. Remove plates one at a time					
4. Place plates in appropriate cupboard one at a time					
5. Remove any pots/pans					
6. Place pots/pans in appropriate cupboard					
7. Remove utensil basket					
8. Place utensil basket on counter near utensil drawer					
9. Place each utensil in appropriate matching drawer section					
10. Replace utensil basket in bottom dishwasher rack					
11. Push in bottom dishwasher rack					
12. Pull out top dishwasher rack					
13. Remove glasses one at a time					
14. Place glasses in appropriate cupboard one at a time					
15. Remove mugs one at a time					
16. Place mugs in appropriate cupboard one at a time					
17. Remove any other items one at a time					
18. Place other items in appropriate cupboard one at a time					
19. Push in top dishwasher rack					
20. Close dishwasher					
#/#					
%					

Make a Snack

Target Steps Date					
1. Go to kitchen					
2. Get a plate from cupboard					
3. Place plate on counter					
4. Take banana from basket on counter					
5. Place banana on plate					
6. Get cracker box from cupboard					
7. Open box					
8. Sprinkle an appropriate number of crackers onto plate					
9. Close box					
10. Put box back in cupboard					
11. Get a cup					
12. Fill cup with water					
13. Take water cup to table					
14. Get napkin					
15. Take napkin and plate to table					
16. Sit down and eat					
#/#					
%					

Task Analysis Template

Target Steps Date					
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					
#/#					
%					

Build New Routines

It may also be necessary to create **new routines** during this time, as there are many new demands of caregivers—possibly homeschooling for the first time, continuing to work in/out of the home, and/or caring for multiple children or other family members. Several new routines that may be helpful are described below:

Transitioning off screens: For many reasons, including those listed above, children and young adults may access screens more often and for longer periods of the day during this time.

Transitioning away from a device, especially after a period of extended use, may be difficult for many children and young adults; however, the behavioral rigidity and inflexibility often characteristic in individuals with autism may make these transitions problematic. Establishing a clear, consistent, and concrete routine for this transition can better prepare the individual for the coming transition and offer support throughout.

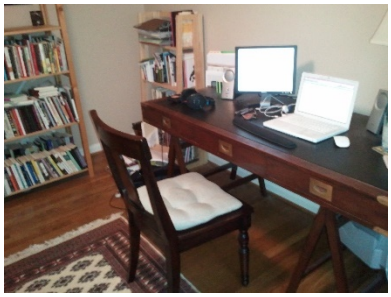
- **Use a visual timer**. It may be helpful for individuals with autism to "see" how much time remains of screen time before they will be expected to transition to off the device. Concepts related to time are fairly abstract (e.g. "You have a few minutes"), often cannot be interpreted literally (e.g. "Just a second" or "We need to get off in a minute"), and may be confusing, especially if time-telling is not a mastered skill. Presenting information related to time visually can assist in making the concepts more meaningful. One example is the Time Timer™ app (https://www.timetimer.com/collections/applications), which displays a section of red that disappears when the time runs out.

- Another visual transition strategy to use is a **visual countdown system**. Like the visual timer, a visual countdown allows an individual to "see" how much time is remaining in an activity. The countdown differs, however, because there is no specific time increment used. This tool is beneficial if the timing of the transition needs to be flexible (e.g. caregiver would like the child to stay engaged on the device during a work

call but does not know when it will end). A countdown system can be made with numbered or colored squares or sticky notes, or any shape or style that is meaningful to the individual. As the transition nears, the caregiver can pull off or cross off the top item (e.g. the number 5) so the individual is able to see that only 4 items remain. The caregiver decides how quickly or slowly to remove the remaining items depending on when the transition will occur. Two minutes may elapse between the removal of number 3 and number 2, while a longer amount of time may elapse before the final number is removed. Once the final item is removed, the individual is taught that it is time to transition. Several examples are provided, and these can be used to support any transition.

Offer choices. In a time of crisis, when most people feel like so much is out of their control, providing choices can increase a sense of autonomy and motivation. Creating regular opportunities across the day where family members have a voice about what happens and when it happens can serve as an effective anxiety reducing strategy and a communication tool. These choices might include the route for the nightly walk, meal options, order of activities for the day, and/or preferences for activities. Several examples are provided for use across the day and age range.

Create a workspace with a to-do list. For the first time, many children and young adults will be expected to complete schoolwork in the home setting. Individuals with autism may have difficulty generalizing the strategies and skills they used in the school environment to the home environment (e.g. organizing materials, attending to work activities, submitting assignments online). Thus, it will be helpful to set up a designated workspace to help clarify expectations and reduce distractions. This may be a spot at the dining room table designated by a colored placemat and facing away from the television or window. If multiple children are working in one space, consider adding a small visual divider (e.g. an open folder) between them. Caregivers can create a visual "to-do" list in several different ways—a) placing the individual worksheets to be completed on the child's left and a small basket on the child's right to put them in when they are finished, or b) writing a short list on a sticky note of the tasks to accomplish during the work session (e.g. 1 science story and 15 minutes of ABC Mouse). These can be crossed off when they are



finished. Older children and young adults can likely generate their own to-do lists but may need some initial support to set up a workspace and launch these routines.

Resources include:

Visual Support: Example of a Daily Schedule
Visual Support: Daily Schedule Template
Visual Support: Example of a Daily Schedule (Using Stickie Notes)
Visual Support: Daily Schedule Template (Using Stickie Notes)
Visual Support: Weekly Schedule Template
Visual Support: Choice Board of Inside and Outside Activities
Visual Support: Weekly Choices and Goals Template
Educational Resources for Kids
Movement Resources for Kids
Educational and Movement Resources for Teenagers
Additional Activity Resources
How to Transition Off Screens

Daily Schedule Example

Task	Done
Wake Up	
Brush Teeth	
Get Dressed	
Eat Breakfast	
Read (30 minutes)	
Exercise (30 minutes)	

* *Note:* Icons from Microsoft Word Icons (Insert tab)

Daily Schedule

Task	Done

Daily Schedule Example

Task	To Be Done	Done
Read (45 minutes)		✓
Computer (30 minutes)		✓
Eat lunch	✓	
Walk the dog	✓	
Complete homework	✓	
Eat snack	✓	

Daily Schedule Using Stickie Notes

Task	To Be Done	Done

Weekly Schedule

Task	S	M	T	W	T	F	S

Inside and Outside Activities

Inside	Outside
Read books	Play ball
Play games	Yard work
Draw or color	Take a walk
Computer games	Go on a nature hike

Weekly Choices and Goals

One thing I want to read for fun this week is:

One thing I plan to do outside this week is:

One game I want to play as a family this week is:

One way I plan to get exercise this week is:

One way I plan to be helpful this week is:

One thing I want to do with _____ (family member) this week is:

One movie/show I want to watch this week is:

One thing I want to learn about this week is:

(Adapted from Danielle Berman, Durham, NC)

Educational Resources for Kids

Starfall	MathGames
Scholastic	NASA's Kid Club
PBS Kids Games	The Weather Channel: America's Science Classroom
National Geographic Kids	Google Arts & Culture

Movement Resources for Kids

Yoga

GoNoodle

The Learning Station

Active for Life

Educational and Movement Resources for Teenagers

Educational	Movement
Khan Academy Free online courses, lessons, and practice	Yoga with Adriene
Scratch Program your own animations and stories	 Born to Move
TEDEd Videos on topics of interest	The Fitologists 74.8K subscribers The Fitologists
Smithsonian Teen Tribune Articles about hot topics written across reading levels	

Additional Activity Resources

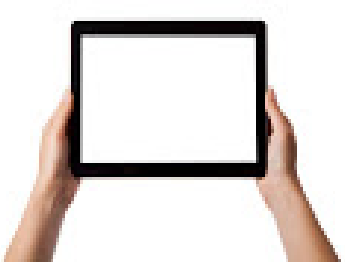
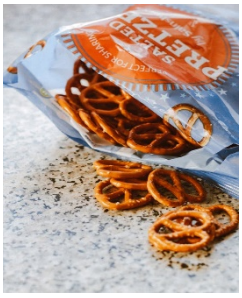
SPACE RACERS Time to learn about space!	Boredom Busters: 110 Fun At-Home Activities for Families & Kids
Family Implemented TEACCH for Toddlers TEACCH strategies that fit into your day Early Learning Activities & Visual Supports	circletime Kids Classes from Home

How to Transition Off Screens

1. As much as possible, try to plan for screen time in the daily schedule. Make the times reasonable for your child's age.

2. Use a timer or clock to let your child know how much screen time they have so that they know what to expect.

3. Try to avoid planning screen time before non-preferred activities. For example, it might be easier to transition your child from screen time to snack than it would be to transition from screen time to an academic task.

First	Then
	

Foster Connections (From a Distance)

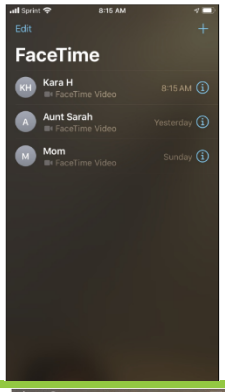
Individuals with autism are more susceptible to social isolation and loneliness, and this may be worsened by quarantine conditions. Positive social support is important for everyone during this period, and individuals with autism may need more explicit facilitation to ensure that social connections continue. Caregivers may need to check in **to ensure social contact** is continuing via text or direct messaging, and/or build in opportunities for daily social contact with family, friends, neighbors, teachers, or others via FaceTime, What's App, Google Hangout, Marco Polo, or other apps. Scheduling time to connect with others via online platforms to attend religious services, play chess, participate in socially engaged gaming, complete online schoolwork, or virtually volunteer are ways to safely promote social interaction and stave off isolation. Several examples provide support around using apps that can foster connectedness.

Resources include:

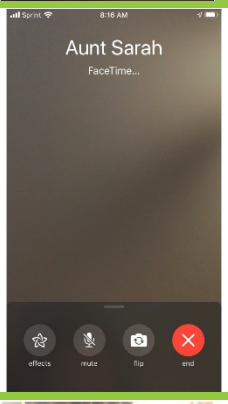
Task Analysis: Calling with FaceTime
Task Analysis: Marco Polo for Video Chats
Video Chat Apps

Calling with FaceTime

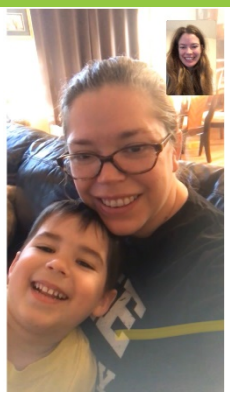
1. Select the FaceTime app.



2. Select who to call.

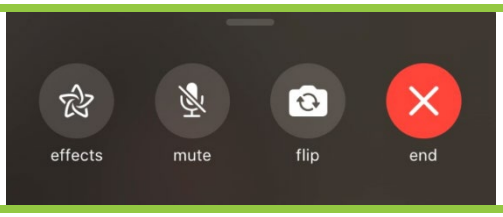


3. Wait for them to answer.



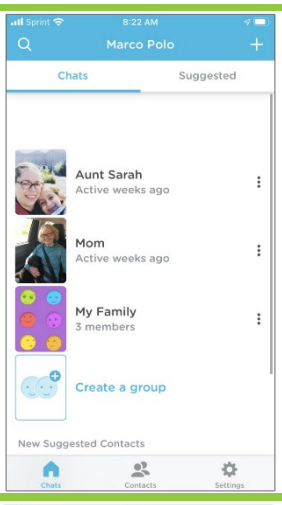
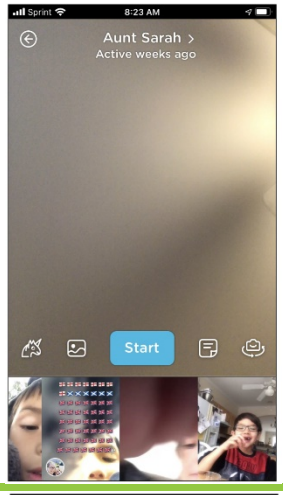
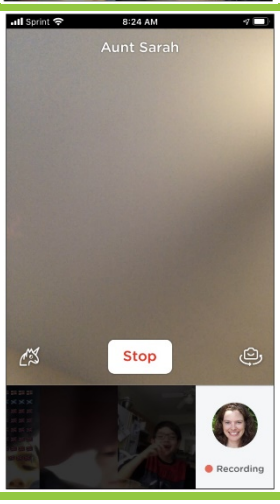
4. Talk with them. You can ask questions such as:

- What shows have you watched?
- Have you played any fun games inside?
- What books are you reading?



5. Say, "Bye." Then end call.

Marco Polo for Video Chats

Marco Polo	**1. Open Marco Polo App**
	**2. Select who to send a video.**
	**3. Press 'Start' and make your video.**
	**4. Press 'Stop' when you are done making your video and send your video.**

Video Chat Apps

FaceTime Free (Apple)	WhatsApp Free	Skype Free
Marco Polo Free	Facebook Messenger Free	Zoom Free
Google Hangouts Free		

Be Aware of Changing Behaviors

As described in **Foster Connections**, individuals with autism may not be able to verbally express their fear, frustration, and anxiety about the many changes and/or their health, so these expressions may be demonstrated through other means. Caregivers should be aware of the behavior of individuals with autism during these uncertain times and **be alert for signs of anxiety and depression**. These may include a change in sleeping or eating patterns, increases in repetitive behaviors, excessive worry or rumination, increased agitation or irritability, or decreases in self-care (Hedges, White, & Smith, 2014, 2015). If these behavior changes are observed, additional support from mental health and/or medical providers such as a family doctor, therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist may be warranted. The individual may require more support or different types of support (e.g., regular therapy, regular exercise, medication). Most mental health providers and non-urgent care medical providers are offering services via telehealth, and emergency legislation has expanded insurance coverage (including Medicaid) for these options.

Resources include:

Crisis Supports

Crisis Supports

Lifeline Crisis Chat Provides emotional support, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention services
Crisis Text Line Text HOME to 741741
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255
IMALIVE Crisis intervention, and suicide prevention services
Girls & Boys Town National Hotline 1-800-448-3000
American Association of Poison Control Centers 1-800-222-1222
National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine Text NAMI to 741741
Warmlines Not in a crisis but just want someone to talk to.

Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times

Plotting a course through the COVID-19 pandemic is a trying experience for all. Caregivers supporting individuals with autism during this time face extra challenges. These 7 strategies and the associated resources and examples will allow individuals with autism to better understand COVID-19, cope with the many changes associated with COVID-19, and practice communication, social, and adaptive skills that may reduce some of the trials during this very uncertain time.

As a caregiver, it is easy to be focused on how this time of uncertainty is impacting the child(ren) in the home, especially those with additional needs, but this pandemic has considerable impact on all family members. We encourage caregivers to prioritize their own self-care in whatever form that takes – meditation, connecting with other parents who understand the situation, watching a favorite show, enjoying a snack alone, exercise, or taking an extra-long shower. Caregivers, alongside the individual with autism, are navigating unprecedented territory without a clear end point which requires ongoing acts of self-kindness and self-preservation.

To learn more about autism, the strategies in this article, and other evidence-based practices, please visit our free, interactive online modules: https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules

- Support understanding
- Offer opportunities for expression
- Prioritize coping and calming skills
- Maintain routines
- Build new routines
- Foster connections (from a distance)
- Be aware of changing behaviors

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