Derbyshire Autism Outreach

SUPPORTING YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD WHEN SCHOOL IS CLOSED

Now that schools are closed and most children are at home, lots of families will be facing the challenge of trying to educate their children themselves. If your child or children has autism, this will inevitably bring additional challenges.

Your own plan for this will depend on your personal circumstances: the age and developmental stage of your child, the needs of any other children that you have, whether you have help at home and whether you are trying to manage your own work at the same time. This advice therefore will need to be tailored to suit your own individual needs. It is important to remember that this is OK: you don't need to worry about your child 'getting behind'. However, it will help most children to have some kind of structure during this period of time and most families will benefit from some educational activities during the school day. This will also help your child to adjust back to learning when the time comes to return to school.

Tip One: Have a schedule

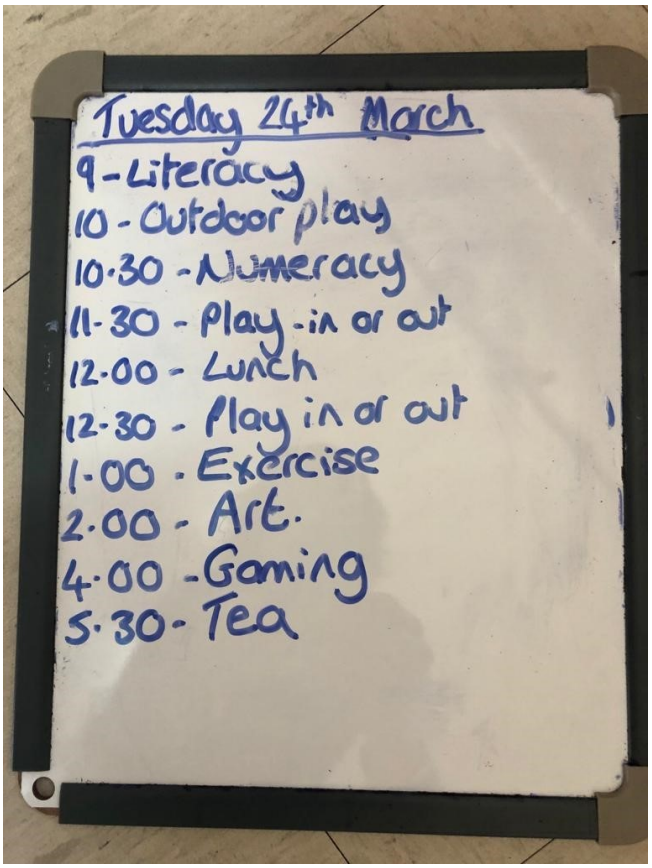
At school, younger children and those with additional needs will usually have a Now and Next timetable.



If your child is reluctant, starting with a fun activity before a learning activity can help get them going. Many children enjoy a sensory activity that gets them ready for learning, followed by a learning activity, followed by a break or free choice activity.

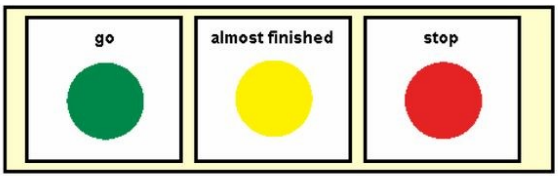
Older children or those without additional learning needs may prefer a half or fully day schedule. This can be in pictures or words, depending on the needs of your child. There are lots of symbols available for free online; however, it is fine to draw pictures as well if you haven't got anything available. Your school may be able to send you copies of the symbols or pictures that they use in school.

"My son usually works better if I put a fun activity on the schedule first or something that will burn off some energy!"

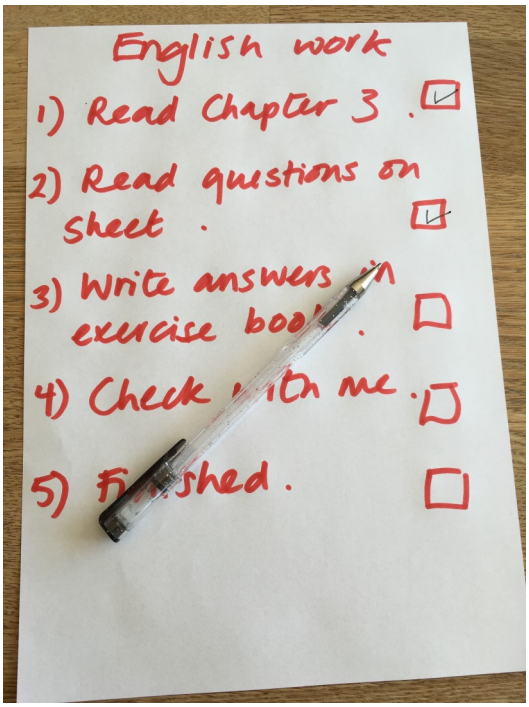


Tip Two: Schedule breaks and fun activities

It is important to include regular breaks on your timetable. Some children will need a break after each work related activity. It can help to use a timer so you and your child know how long they will have.



"We do our 'jobs' at the dining table and then go into the living room or outside when it's time for a break. At the end of the morning all the 'work' goes in a box and out of the way.".



"I use 'traffic lights' to show my daughter how long she has left with a job or fun activity. I start with three spots and take one away to help her to understand how much time is left.

Tip Three: Add Structure

It can help to have a particular place for work and to encourage children to move to a different space when having a break or when learning is finished. If this isn't possible, try to move work activities away when it is time for a break and vice versa.

Try to set straightforward and realistic tasks for your child. Most children with autism like to know what they have to do now, how long it is going to last and what they will do next. If the tasks set by school don't make this clear, break it down for your child e.g. one page of a maths exercise book or five minutes on Times Table RockStars. If your child is at the early stages of learning, choose an activity that will not need much verbal explanation, for example, a simple puzzle.



Older children might be find a checklist helpful so they know exactly what they have to do for each task.

Tip Four: Meet sensory needs

Meeting your child's sensory needs will be especially important at the moment. How you do this will depend on the individual needs of your child. Some children need to move around a lot and others need more quiet time. Most children need a mix of activities that 'wake them up' and 'calm them down' across the day.



Tip Five Make it work for you

One good thing about home learning is that you can adjust it to suit your personal circumstances. If you need to work yourself, it will not be possible to have your child on learning tasks all day. Some children will be able to work by themselves and others will need a lot of support. As well as school work, this might be a good opportunity to encourage your child to learn some new skills, for example, making their own bed, taking care of a pet or making a snack or drink. It could also be a great time to really get into an area of particular interest…if your child likes to get absorbed in a topic, let them have time to explore their interest.

If you have more than one child, it will be even more important to be realistic in your expectations. Having one child on a break whilst the other child is learning may help. However, it is important to have clear periods of time when learning and work are not taking place.

If you are working from home, make sure that your employer is aware of your family situation and ask for adjustments to be made.

Playing with sand, dry pasta or colouring helps my children to feel relaxed before we do a work job. Then afterwards we need to go outside to burn off some energy!

Tip Six: Dealing with fears and worries

This is a scary time for children and adults and it is natural that your child may feel even more anxious than usual. If your child is very worried, having a set time to talk each day can be helpful. Some children find it helpful to write down their worries and 'put them away' in a box. Some children might find a social story helpful...see links below.



"I do a couple of hours work in the morning before the children start their school work. Then a couple of hours in the middle of the day when they are having a break and doing drawing, reading or playing outside. I do another couple of hours in the evening if I can but I've told my boss that I might not be able to do everything."

Tip Seven: Manage screen time and stay saife online

Too much time on technology is likely to leave your child irritable and difficult to motivate. However, when parents are balancing lots of different priorities some time for screens will usually be part of the day. Ensure that you understand about using the internet safely and that you have set up appropriate parental controls, dependent on the age and stage of your child. Further information can be found in the links section.

My kids have some time on devices before we start our work, and some more afterwards. It gives me time to get other things done! Before bed we usually try to go for a walk or play a game, otherwise they don't sleep well.",

"I was worried when I saw how much work was being put online but I phoned the school SENCO and he's sent me some activities that are more suitable.'



Tip Eight: Look after yourself

This is a very stressful time for everyone and anxiety is likely to be high. As well as missing out on school and work, you may have lost your normal support networks, for example, family members and friends. It is important to ask for help if you feel that you are not able to cope. In the first instance, contact your child's school as they are the service who currently knows your child best. If you are struggling with your own emotions, it may be helpful to contact your GP. If you feel that you or your child is at risk, use the Call Derbyshire helpline 01629 533190.

"I've got to say, I am panicking! I usually see my parents a couple of times a week and the children can't understand why they can't see their Nanna and Grandad. They are also scared that they are going to get sick and die. I phoned the school and someone phoned me back the same day. It was good to talk...they didn't have all of the answers but it made me feel like I wasn't alone.

FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

ON AUTISM AND THE CORONAVIRUS

The National Autistic Society for general advice around autism. Includes resources and tips about the coronavirus and runs a helpline for autistic people and their families: https://www.autism.org

Autism East Midlands. Includes top tips for dealing with school closures and managing anxiety.: https://www.autismeastmidlands.org.uk

The Autism Educator. A handy social story to help explain the coronavirus and other useful resources.: https://theautismeducator.ie/2020/03/11/corona-virus-social-story/

The PDA Society. Lots of information and links to further sources of support for young people and families.: https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/links-and-tips-for-the-pda-community-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/

FOR HOME LEARNING

Home Learning UK is a new hub with the aim of being a central point of information for everything related to home learning: https://homelearninguk.weebly.com/

Twinkl is offering free home learning and closure packs during the school closure period: https://www.twinkl.co.uk/

IN DERBYSHIRE

Derbyshire County Council has local information about the situation in Derbyshire and advice and guidance for schools and parents with links to further information: https://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/social-health/health-and-wellbeing/health-protection/disease-control/coronavirus/schools/schools-parents.aspx