
Supporting Students With Autism

Considerations

Children and youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may struggle to adapt to changes in everyday life brought about by COVID-19. When determining how to help children and adolescents with ASD, consider the various persons involved (e.g., student, teacher, occupational therapy practitioner, counselor), the multiple environments encountered (e.g., classroom, gymnasium, therapy gym), and the array of tasks and occupations performed (e.g., learning, playing). Below are some tips for teachers and school staff to consider when working with students with ASD.

Understanding COVID-19

- Use stories to explain the transmission of COVID-19 and to provide reassurance about personal health and safety.
- Provide visual supports, cue cards, stories, and videos to convey rules related to social distancing.
- Use visual supports and timers during [handwashing](#).
- Use visual timers, schedules, and calendars to explain and mark the passage of time (e.g., how many days before returning to school).
- Model and practice the use of personal protective equipment such as masks and other facial coverings.

Supporting Self-Regulation

- Incorporate sensory strategies to proactively support self-regulation throughout the school day.
- [Collaborate with occupational therapy practitioners](#) to develop in-class activities and resources to support self-regulation.
- Create a [self-management](#) plan (e.g., strategies to cope with emotions and exhibit school-appropriate behaviors) as appropriate.
- Encourage the expression of feelings and to self-advocate for needs.
- Provide opportunities to request and take breaks throughout the day.
- Incorporate physical activity, such as stretching and movement breaks, throughout the school day.
- Use apps to encourage self-monitoring.
- Encourage consistent routines.

Promoting Mental Health

- Provide opportunities to make choices.
- Prepare students to cope with unexpected disruptions in routine.
- Monitor changes in emotions and behaviors, and [access mental health services](#) if needed.
- Encourage engagement in activities that promote happiness.

Engaging in Distance Learning

- Facilitate independent work by providing [structured work boxes](#).
- Use [visual schedules](#) and pictures to offer choices for break activities.

- Identify [activity choices](#) to address academics, life skills, and leisure pursuits.
- Use structured systems to encourage engagement in learning activities, such as [first-then boards](#) and checklists.

Facilitating Social Participation

- Support [social and emotional learning](#).
- Use apps and video chat tools to facilitate connections between students when socially distanced.
- Encourage classmates to use text and instant messaging tools to ask one another for assistance with assignments.
- Encourage families to schedule virtual meeting times for students when school is not in session.

General Resources

- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Strategies for Students with Autism](#) (PDF)
- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Settings: How Occupational Therapy Can Help](#) (PDF)
- [UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute Autism Team—Supporting Individuals With Autism through Uncertain Times](#)
- [Bridging Apps](#), a program of Easter Seals Greater Houston, provides resources, education, and information on apps and mobile devices

Social Stories Resources

- Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT)—[Social Distancing Social Story](#) (available in English, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and Burmese)
- Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT)—[Wearing a Mask Social Story](#) (available in English, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and Burmese)
- Easter Seals Illinois Autism Partnership—[Coronavirus Story for Younger Children](#) (PDF)
- Easter Seals Illinois Autism Partnership—[Coronavirus Story of High School Children and Young Adults](#) (PDF)
- Easter Seals Illinois Autism Partnership—[Social Distancing Story for Younger Children](#) (PDF)
- Easter Seals Illinois Autism Partnership—[Social Distancing Story for High School Children and Young Adults](#) (PDF)

Video Resources

- Munson Health Care—[Videos Explaining Social Distancing to Kids](#) (includes videos for different age groups)

Resources for Developing Routines

- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Mealtime Routines for Children](#) (PDF)
- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Bath Time Routines for Children](#) (PDF)
- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Bedtime Routines for Children](#) (PDF)
- American Occupational Therapy Association—[Morning Routines for Children](#) (PDF)
- Nebraska Autism Spectrum Disorders Network—[Rules and Routines](#)