

West Sussex  
Autism and Social  
Communication Team.

Presents.....

Working at home with your child  
2020.



# Introduction

This guide aims to support parents with a range of ideas to support their children, whom may have social communication differences/ autism during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The ideas and support frameworks are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for ideas and ways that may support your child at home.

## Top Tips:

**Take care of yourself** so you can keep supporting your child or children. Eat well, sleep well...and breathe!



**Routine.** An element of predictability is reassuring and helps us to feel safe. It's good to know that everyday some things will stay the same and some things will be different.

**Be active.** Exercising releases 'feel good' hormones-endorphins and dopamine which regulate our emotions. Be creative, use the space you have, watch You Tube children's workouts, create mini-workouts, run up and down stairs, get outside if you can.



**Have family time-but also create space.** Strike a balance between having fun family time such as playing games and watching movies, but also set rules to enable every family member to have some time alone each day.



**Balance screen time with other activities.** Ensure your child or children aren't enjoying screen time to the exclusion of everything else.

**Coach your child or children through strong emotions.** When your child gets upset or cross, coach them through handling that emotion and try to avoid reacting with a strong emotion of your own. Teach your child to identify, name and cope with their stress responses.



**Set and stick to boundaries.** Set family rules and stick to them consistently. Having family rules and following them through is vital to maintain healthy, happy families.



**Learn a new skill.** Let your child choose a new skill to learn, help them find out how to do it, perhaps on the internet. Learning a new skill gives a sense of achievement which gives a vital boost to mental health.

**Be a good role model.** Be aware of what you do and say in front of your children, remember they will see how you respond during stressful times and it is likely they will respond in the same way. Try to respond to events in a way that you'd like your child to copy.

# Anxiety

It is important to appreciate that anxiety is not simply a part of autism but an independently co-occurring condition that can be addressed in its own right. With this in mind, during this period of uncertainty and isolation, it will be important to work with our children to support them to regulate their 'Intolerance of Uncertainty' which is what current research places at the heart of anxiety difficulties in autism.



Briefly, frequent sensory processing differences and difficulties in understanding one's own emotions are thought to make the world more uncertain and unpredictable for autistic individuals, which can be difficult to tolerate, resulting in anxious responses including *fight, flight or freeze* type behaviours.



With all this in mind we can first begin to **unpick** what may be contributing to our child's anxiety and then identify how we can begin to **support** them.

## Sensory processing differences



Sensory processing differences are now recognised as part of the Autism Spectrum Condition. Recent evidence suggests that differences in sensory prediction processes are a part of this. So, if children with autism find it hard to predict their sensory world then they will have more uncertainty which in turn has an impact on their levels of anxiety. (See following sensory section for more information/guidance on managing the sensory world).



## Emotional recognition and regulation

Many autistic individuals (around 50%) have difficulties identifying and describing their own emotions (which is known as alexithymia). They may have difficulty recognising the arousal levels associated with emotions (using their interoceptive sensory system – see following sensory section for further explanation of this). They may also have difficulty regulating their emotions which may mean they suppress feelings or express them in inappropriate/challenging ways. You can see then, that there may be a cyclical effect of having feelings you don't understand which make you anxious and not being able to regulate your anxious feelings which makes you more anxious.

## What you can do to reduce anxiety:

As well as supporting your child to **manage** their sensory needs you can also help to **reduce** their uncertainty. In the short term, this might include sharing explanations about COVID 19 in a format which matches their level of understanding. One example can be found through the following link:

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>

Additional information is also available from the National Autistic Society:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/information.aspx>

You can also reduce uncertainty by adding more structure and routine to home life – see following pages on visual structure and routines.

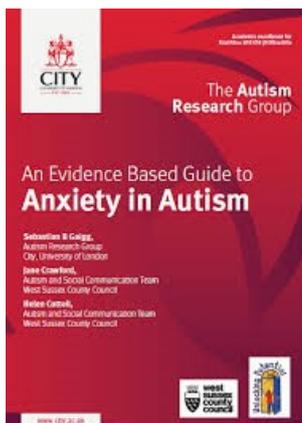
## Mindfulness

You can introduce some relaxation activities to reduce emotional arousal levels – mindfulness Apps and activities can be useful.



The following may be helpful:

- **Headspace: Guided Meditation and Mindfulness:** [https://www.headspace.com/signup?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=821964437&utm\\_content=42127572397&utm\\_term=199115809880&headspace%20app&gclid=CK-r\\_8-EhtUCFWUq0wodMnkK7w](https://www.headspace.com/signup?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=821964437&utm_content=42127572397&utm_term=199115809880&headspace%20app&gclid=CK-r_8-EhtUCFWUq0wodMnkK7w)
- **Breathing Bubbles:** <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/breathing-bubbles/id962463836?mt=8>
- **Headspace: Guided Meditation and Mindfulness:** [https://www.headspace.com/signup?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=821964437&utm\\_content=42127572397&utm\\_term=199115809880&headspace%20app&gclid=CK-r\\_8-EhtUCFWUq0wodMnkK7w](https://www.headspace.com/signup?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=821964437&utm_content=42127572397&utm_term=199115809880&headspace%20app&gclid=CK-r_8-EhtUCFWUq0wodMnkK7w)
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For more information on anxiety and strategies to support your child, refer to the following document for further information:

[https://www.city.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/466039/Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf](https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/466039/Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf)

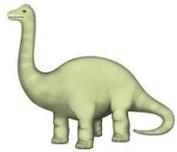
# Learning.

## Structure and Routine

Developing a structure and gentle routine for your child will be of great comfort at this time when things feel so different. Going from the structure of school to being at home all the time will be a new experience for your child which will be full of uncertainty and may increase anxiety.



Ease yourselves into a 'home learning' routine gradually, adapting to the changes this brings. Perhaps establish 'work time' followed by 'snack time,' 'exercise' and then some 'free time.' etc. Showing this visually can be helpful.



## Using interests.

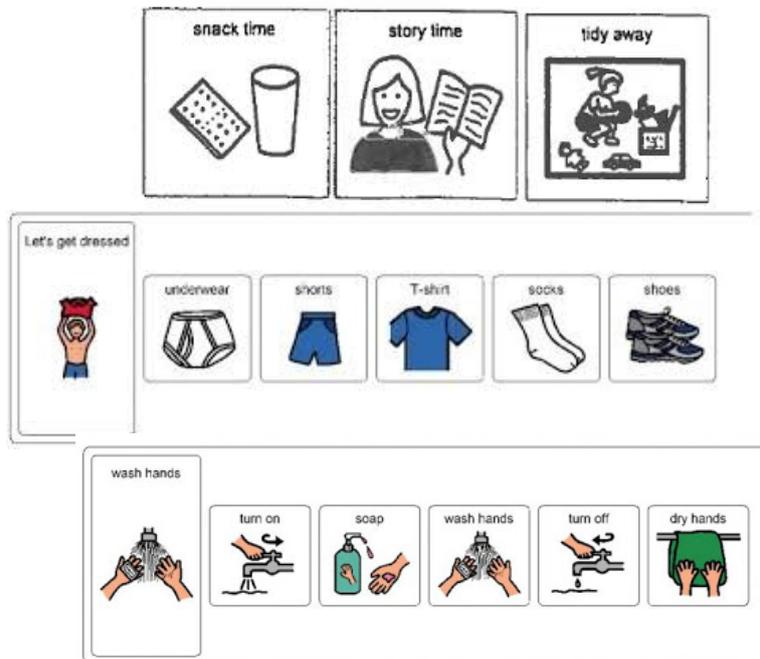
Children with Social Communication Differences / Autism are likely to have strong and specialised interest. Now is an ideal time to use you children's interests to support their learning at home.

- **Project work** can be based around a special interest. Researching on the internet, finding facts in books, making 'fact sheets' or 'information leaflets' is a creative way of presenting work, either hand written or produced on the computer perhaps in Word or PowerPoint etc.
- **Computer learning.** If your child enjoys I.T. there are many learning websites you can access. Your child's school website will have recommended websites.
- **Down Time and Relaxation.** Time spent on special interests will be relaxing and calming for your child so ensure there are times during the day where your child can switch off and enjoy their special interest.



## Visuals

Visuals can be used to support routines, the sequencing of activities (eg getting dressed) and to support behaviour. Visual prompts and cues can be useful for children who find language and time concepts difficult to understand.



## Now and Next Board

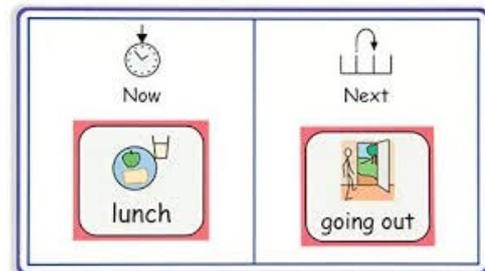
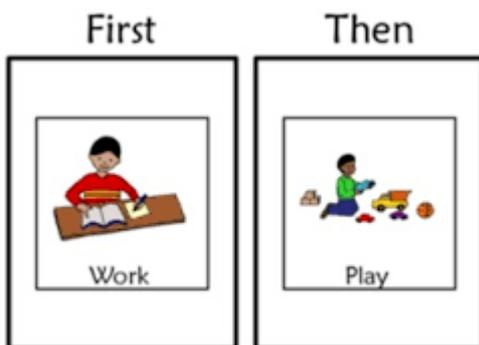
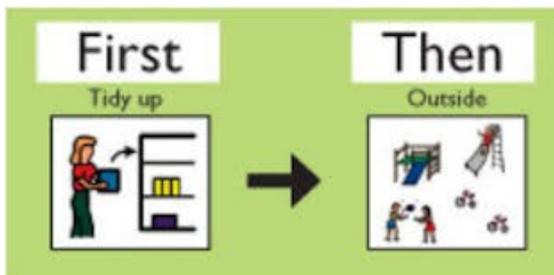
Visual prompts can be useful in showing children what is expected of them and also to prepare them for what is coming next.

Some children find it difficult to move from one activity to another.

There may be certain activities that a child doesn't like, however if you can show them that after this activity they will be able to do something that they do like, then it can motivate them to complete the first activity.

### How to use a Now and Next Board

Draw or put a picture (symbol or photo) of the activity you want your child to do at the time on the 'now' side and a picture of what they will be doing next on the 'next' side. You could use a mini whiteboard to do this, a list or real objects.

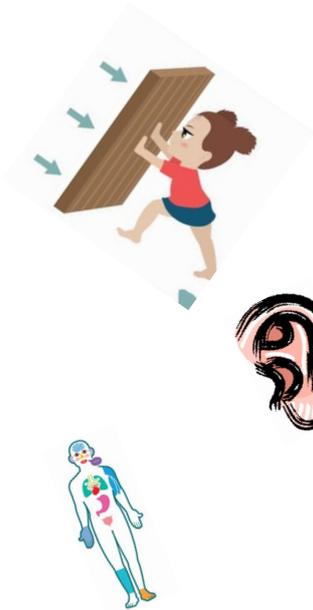


# Supporting Sensory Integration

## Sensory Processing Differences

Children and young people on the Autism Spectrum often experience sensory processing differences. The impact of these sensory sensitivities can be significant, and, what can be perceived as inappropriate behaviour, may be a sensory response to an uncomfortable stimulus.

We have 8 different sensory systems and a child may experience processing differences in one or more systems:



**Tactile** (touch)

**Gustatory** (taste)

**Olfactory** (smell)

**Visual** (sight)

**Auditory** (hearing)

**Proprioceptive** (body awareness)

**Vestibular** (movement/balance)

**Interoceptive** (Awareness of internal state e.g. hunger, temperature and emotional feelings)



During this time your child may become easily overwhelmed. They may be taking part in less physical activity than usual and may have less space. It is likely that they will benefit from sensory input. It may be that, in the current situation, your child's sensory differences present quite differently, as home presents him/her with different sensory demands to school and the rest of the outside world.



### Top Tips:

- Ensure your child has access to regular movement breaks, especially after periods of seated work. Consider: Jumping Jacks, jumping on a trampoline, wall or chair pushes, animal crawls
- Downtime between tasks will be important.
- Organise a low arousal space for your child to retreat to e.g. a tent/ their bedroom/ a space outside. The social demands and 1:1 contact may be increased during this time, so this space may be needed
- Include daily sensory sessions in your child's routine lasting 10—15 minutes.
- Set up a sensory treasure box using items you already have at home using a shoe box or other container. Your child may like to help decorate their box.
- A choice of calming set of activities may support your child with self-regulation if they start to become overwhelmed.
- If you notice that your child is becoming distracted during a task/ activity, it may be worth giving them a sensory break, they may need a chance to reset.



## Sensory Circuits



A Sensory circuit could be introduced to the day include alerting, organising and calming activities. Always end with calming activities.

- **Alerting:** Introduce up and down movements for a short period of time. Jumping Jacks, clapping activities and games, making faces – open mouth and eyes wide or screwing up face, stamping on the spot, sucking a sour sweet, eating crunchy food, drinking cold drinks with ice in.
- **Organising:** Heavy work (including carrying a heavy bag, books, wheelbarrow), wall push-ups with hands and feet, jumping on trampoline, popcorn jumps (jumping from a squat position and then landing back in a squat position), wheelbarrow-walking, crawling through tunnels, obstacle course
- **Calming Activities:** Rocking slowly over a ball on their tummy or rocking/ swaying, tucking legs up and squeezing, laying under a heavy blanket, soft music (spa CD), big hugs, laying on the floor while an adult rolls a ball over top giving some deep pressure, Using two fingers on both sides of the spine to give firm downward strokes ,3-5 times.



### Helpful Resources:

- A sensory checklist with activity ideas is available from: [https://westsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com/public/system/attachments/1116/original/NEW\\_Sensory\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://westsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com/public/system/attachments/1116/original/NEW_Sensory_Toolkit.pdf)
- **Sensory Strategies: Practical ways to help children and young people with autism learn and achieve** by Corinna Laurie. Published by The National Autistic Society
- **Making Sense of Sensory Behaviour by Falkirk Council:** <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/social-care/disabilities/docs/youngpeople/Making%20Sense%20of%20Sensory%20Behaviour.pdf?v=201507131117>
- <https://lemonlimeadventures.com/sensory-break-ideas-for-kids/>
- **Interceptive Clip:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0zbCiakjaA>
- **Tools To Grow OT** [www.toolstogrowot.com](http://www.toolstogrowot.com)
- **Sensory Integration Network** [www.sensoryintegration.org.uk](http://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk)
- **The National Autistic Society** – [www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understandingbehaviour/](http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understandingbehaviour/) the-sensory-world-of-autism.aspx.
- The Out of Sync Child [www.out-of-sync-child.com](http://www.out-of-sync-child.com)
- **CRAE at UCL** <http://crae.ioe.ac.uk/post/130547691038/sensory-sensitivities-in-autism-explained>
- **Eating- Infant and Toddler Forum** <https://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/>
- **Eating- National Steering Group for childhood feeding disorders (NSG)** <http://www.nsg-cfd.com/>
- **Sensory Resources:** <https://www.chewigem.co.uk/shop/>
- **Sensory Resources:** <https://specialneedstoys.com/uk/auditory/noisy-toys>