

Ask the Pediatrician: How can I help my child, who has a developmental disability, during the pandemic?

27 January 2021, by Dr. Jennifer Poon



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Q: How can I help my child, who has a developmental disability, cope during COVID-19?

A: Being a parent or caregiver of a child with a developmental disability has its own daily challenges, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some simple things you can do to help your child understand and adjust to changes such as not seeing their teachers or classmates in person, having to wear masks or cloth face coverings, or having to keep a distance from people who are outside of their household:

- Monitor your child's feelings. As you know, even if your child has limited speech, they are communicating with you through actions. Increased restlessness, tantrums, or sleeping or eating poorly may be signs of stress or worry. Give your child extra hugs and positive words to show you understand how they feel.

- Help your child understand. Try to explain the situation using all the types and ways of communication (such as words, pictures, music, etc.) your child can understand. This may mean repeating it several times over several days. You can also try using stories with pictures that help explain a situation. For example, say, "There's a germ called coronavirus." Then try to show and explain, "We can't stand too close to other people when we are outside our home." There are some good examples online of social stories that can be used to help explain COVID-19.

- Try to keep routines. Children like structure and routines, such as going to school, therapies, coming home, so they know what to expect. Since routines are different right now, it may make some children feel unsettled. It can be hard for families to create and maintain schedules caring for children at home all day while also juggling work and other responsibilities. But trying to keep some familiar routines along with the new ones can help reduce overall stress. Visual schedules with drawings can help your child see what the day looks like and what comes next.

- Spend some time outside each day, if possible, while practicing social distancing. This can help your child get some exercise. Regular exercise may also help keep a [regular sleep schedule](#), which can be a challenge for children with developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder. Adequate sleep helps support a child's physical and emotional health.

- Stay connected virtually. Continue to find creative ways for your child to connect with [family](#) and friends, such as with video calls or texting. It's also important to stay in touch with teachers and therapists so you can ask questions or seek advice. Many children also enjoy seeing their teachers and

therapists on video calls. This is also a good time to connect with local family led organizations that may offer virtual social opportunities.

– Model behavior and coping skills. Show and explore with your child positive ways to deal with stress. If you feel frustrated, for example, tell him or her: "I am taking a deep breath to calm down," or "I need to take a walk to unwind." (Even better, suggest a family walk when possible to help everyone relax.)

– Take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself is key to helping you continue taking care of others during the pandemic. Try to eat healthy, regular meals, exercise and get enough sleep. Finding others to talk to, whether in person, or by phone or video can also help relieve stress and make you feel less alone. Family support groups are a great way to connect with other parents of [children](#) with developmental disabilities.

– Prioritize what works for your child and family. It's OK to set family goals like having meals together, calling grandparents, working on life skills, and doing something fun with your [child](#). These can be just as important as other goals to move forward during stressful times.

Dr. Jennifer Poon is a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics. For more information, go to [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org), the website for parents from the AAP.

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