



LIFE AT HOME DURING COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

It has been several weeks now since everyone's lives were turned upside down. None of us were prepared for the rapid changes that took place with the closing of schools, daycares, preschools, recreation centers, and the cancellation of community classes and programs. We've been cut off from family and friends, many of whom were a part of our support system.

With the cancellation of so many aspects of our world such as work, travel and school, our lives are now centered on being at home. Families are together all day long; outside supports have disappeared. No visitors can come to the house. The move to online learning has not been completely successful for some people because they find the online format overwhelming and too fast paced. Parents are worried about skill regression or how to cope as behaviors escalate in isolation.

I, too, am at home full time with my two autistic adult children. I have had to get creative every day to make sure my children are happy, healthy and well taken care of in the absence of support personnel, community programs and volunteer jobs. I have a whole new set of worries about food shortages, finances, the economy, our family health, and when this pandemic will end. I find myself feeling worried one moment, resigned in the next. I fluctuate between anxiousness and calmness, feeling energetic and then extremely tired.

For the past 17 years in my role as the director of Autism Awareness Centre, I have had the privilege of hearing many speakers through our conferences, attending events, taking webinars, reading books, and interacting with other parents and professionals from all over the world. It is through this knowledge and lived experience as a parent that I am able to write about a variety of topics. I enjoy sharing the information that I have learned and strategies that work.

I hope you find this e-book helpful and useful in navigating this new "at home" world in which we live. If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to e-mail me at maureen@autismawarenesscentre.com and I will do my best to provide answers and direction during this uncertain time. We're all in this together.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



THE NEW ASD “AT HOME” WORLD

10 WAYS TO COPE WITH CHANGES DURING COVID-19

The recent events around [COVID-19](#) have dramatically altered our world in a short period of time. Each new day is bringing different challenges, restrictions and uncertainties. For our autism community, these changes create a unique set of problems. Activities have stopped running, day programs are shut down, schools are closed, and at home support/respite staff are not working during this period. Many of us have lost our jobs and now face a precarious economic future. Businesses and services have closed or reduced their hours. The closing of libraries and recreation centers have been particularly hard to bear in our household. Food shortages and long lines to enter the grocery store a few at a time is now the norm.

With our children home with us 24/7 now, how do we keep things on an even keel amidst this chaos?

Keep routines as consistent as possible for those with autism

Routines are the most important thing to keep going as they provide [predictability which in turn lessens anxiety](#). Keep bedtime, bath time and mealtimes consistent. Get dressed every day. Make sure personal hygiene habits stay in place. It's easy to let things slide – we had a bad week in this department but we're back on track.

Make a daily visual schedule

With no school or programs running, there are unavoidable schedule changes in the day. Make a [daily schedule](#) with some preferred activities on it. Limit screen time if you can. Schedule some family social time and play a cause and effect board game such as Kerplunk, Operation or [Don't Wake Daddy](#). Card games like Old Maid or Go Fish are fun too. Going for a ride in the car provides a change of scene.

Listen to calming music

Classical music in particular is very calming. Have it playing in the background. Mozart, Beethoven Piano Sonatas, string quartet music, Chopin Ballades are nice choices. My husband is a professional pianist so he plays a concert every day for about two hours. Our son just lights up and the music changes the atmosphere of the house.

Get plenty of exercise and fresh air

Making time to exercise is a must because it lowers anxiety, helps with sleep, and supports regulation. Go for a walk outdoors for fresh air but if the weather doesn't permit, try using a mini trampoline or doing [yoga](#). Develop a [simple exercise routine](#) that can be done for 20 minutes a day. Vary the activities if you can.

FaceTime or Skype with family and friends

Staying at home means not seeing family and friends. It helps to stay connected. My daughter likes being involved when I FaceTime my sister and seeing what her cat is doing. Connecting with a person visually gives assurance that they are well and can provide some outside interest.

Have some quiet time

Block off some quiet time in the day for meditation, a 20 minute nap, quiet time alone in a bedroom, or for reading. Down time is important for relaxation and self-regulation. Being together all the time can be difficult so breaks are a must.

Expand on interests

I have written a lot on the topic of [expanding interests](#). Does your child like to cook? Try a new recipe. Does your child like to sort things? Do a pantry clean out to take stock of what you have and group the items into sections like canned veggies, baking items and spices.

Limit demands and changes

With so many changes that have happened in the past weeks, try to limit adding more new things. This may not be the week to learn a new skill. Allow time for adjustment to the new schedule changes. Try adding one new thing at a time, not several, and space it out. Pull back if you see anxiety building. Think about implementing [Low Arousal Approaches](#) at home.

Talk about COVID-19

Talk about what COVID-19 is to take the mystery out of it. Read a [social story](#) about it. The [National Association for Autism](#) has some excellent COVID-19 resources. Address questions and phobias about the virus. For example, my daughter was afraid that all cats would get sick.

Discuss other pandemics and diseases and how they were cured. This isn't the first time in history that we've faced a pandemic. Vaccines were developed for polio, treatments are available for tuberculosis which was once a number one killer – these health crises passed. COVID-19 will end and researchers are working on a solution to this problem every day. It's important to know that something is being done to help people and we will not be in this place forever.

Teaching proper hand washing to children with autism

Learning how to [wash your hands](#) is an important skill to practice as it lessens the spread of this virus. Scrubbing is recommended for 20 seconds. Sing a song for 20 seconds to help with the timing of this or you can count if your child likes numbers. Click [here](#) for some good hand washing videos for kids and songs to sing while washing. More hand washing resources can be found [here](#).

We have some difficult weeks ahead, but we will get through this trying time. The most important thing right now is keeping everyone safe and healthy. Take steps to remain so by staying at home, washing hands, and covering your mouth when you cough and sneeze. These are good habits to practice all the time, but we need to be more diligent than ever.

We are here – working from home – to answer any questions you may have during these trying times. We are also to processing book orders if you need any resources. We are all in this together.

Discuss other pandemics and diseases and how they were cured. This isn't the first time in history that we've faced a pandemic.



EMBEDDING SKILL BUILDING ACTIVITIES

INTO DAILY ROUTINES AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD

The current COVID-19 situation has caused many programs, schools, preschools and daycares to temporarily close their doors. Services are also on hold such as occupational and speech therapy. This has caused many parents to feel anxious that their child may regress with their development. If parents are hoping for a diagnostic assessment, the additional wait times will be increased under the current circumstances. It can be hard to feel confident supporting a child's special needs if you aren't sure how to do this. Take heart, though, as there are easy ways to support skill development within daily routines and other activities. There is also the gift of time now to slow down and allow for a longer period to teach skills.

Let's have a look at a few topics and explore ideas on how to keep those skills growing during service and school interruptions.

What skills can we work on with our children with autism while at home during COVID-19?

Body Awareness

Right and Left Discrimination

Knowing the left and right side is important to a child's understanding of where he is in a space and how the world is organized. There are 3 parts to this concept – the right/left of oneself, other individuals and objects. Many children with ASD are delayed in determining if they are right or left-handed. There is an above average number of people with autism who are left-handed.

Some daily activities to do to provide a right/left understanding are:

- When reading a book, point out what side of the page a favorite character is drawn on.
- Show left and right sides of favorite objects (stuffed toys, cars, figurines.)
- During bath time, identify left and right sides of the body as you wash body parts.
- When getting dressed, ask for the child's right or left foot to put a sock on. Do this with mittens before going outside. Say, "This is your left hand".
- When walking and holding a child's hand, say what hand you are holding.
- When the child is eating or drinking, say what hand he is using.
- Sing songs that talk about left and right like "The Hokey Pokey". You can also find Left and Right songs on YouTube, but sometimes these songs are sung too fast to keep up with. Experiment and see what works.
- Set the table, one object at a time. For example, put the dinner plate on the place mat. Have the child place the fork on the left, the spoon to the right.

Coordination

Eye-Hand Coordination

Children with ASD will not seek out toys or objects to use in a meaningful way which contributes to a delay in eye-hand coordination. Try putting objects of different shapes and textures into a pillowcase. Show each object and name it as you put it into the pillowcase. Have the child pull one object at a time, allowing for manipulation of the object. Talk about the object and demonstrate how to manipulate that object. Great objects to use – a ball, slinky, set of keys, windup toy, a small stuffed animal. This game allows a child to visualize an object in his mind and understanding of object permanence. Avoid toys that require batteries or react when a button is pushed. The child needs to have the impact on the object.

Other activities – shape matching, following a rolling ball, floor play with driving a train in a wide circle or figure 8 pattern, rolling a ball back and forth, hitting a balloon in the air, popping bubbles.

A note on video games – while children can become experts at video games, the skills that they learn while doing so are not transferable to other functional areas of life.

Fine Motor Skills

Fine motor skills are necessary for writing, eating, using clothing fasteners like buttons or snaps, and participating in leisure activities such as drawing or coloring.

Pincer Grasp

- Make pizza dough and have the child pinch off small sections. Dip those in a variety of seasonings placed in small bowls. Drop onto a cookie sheet and bake.
- Squeeze a wet sponge to water plants.
- Use kitchen tools like a rolling pin, garlic press, and cookie cutters on dough to build hand strength.
- Use scissors to cut thicker items like play-dough, straws, and foam shapes if they aren't ready for paper.
- Pick up small objects with chop sticks or tongs.
- Play games like Pick Up Sticks, Don't Spill the Beans, Don't Break the Ice, and Kerplunk.
- Pinch off dead leaves on plants.

Regulation

Children with ASD can become dysregulated when their world becomes unpredictable. Too many demands, over-stimulation and not understanding what is expected can increase stress levels. To [keep things clear and predictable](#):

- Give directions stating what to do rather than what not to do.
- Give warnings that use consistent, simple language. Ex. "It's almost time to clean up and wash hands for dinner." Set a sand timer to show the time passing.
- Sing relevant songs, use objects, pictures or signs to help with understanding during transitions.
- Give a cue that there is a change coming like waving bye-bye to a truck. Put a finished activity into a bin and close the lid.
- Focus on what the child is doing next rather than what they are leaving.
- Give choices when you can. Sometimes when a child has a diagnosis, all their choices are taken away from them and they are told what to do. This is frustrating.
- Make routines as predictable as possible. Break down daily living skill tasks such as tooth brushing, [handwashing](#) and dressing with step by step pictures on a strip of cardboard or paper.

Relaxation/Downtime

Relaxation and downtime are just as important as having activities to do. Many children don't know how to relax and need to be taught what some options could be. This is a skill that will serve them throughout their lives. The relaxation routine my son has now was first introduced to him as a preschooler.

Some ideas to relax are:

- Listening to music
- Deep breathing
- [Gentle stretching/yoga](#)
- Listen to an audio story, read or be read to
- Rock in a rocking chair
- Retreat to a designated quiet space
- [Colouring](#)

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Autism Intervention Every Day! Embedding Activities in Daily Routines for Young Children and Their Families*](#)
- ☰ [*Carolina Curriculum for Preschoolers with Special Needs \(2nd Ed.\)*](#)
- ☰ [*Everyday Activities to Help Your Young Child with Autism Live Life to the Full*](#)
- ☰ [*1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Revised Edition*](#)
- ☰ [*Tasks Galore, Revised Edition*](#)



TEACHING SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS ONLINE AND AT HOME

I am getting requests from teachers and other support staff on how to best serve their students with special educational needs while at home. Some individuals will not have the ability or capacity to engage in traditional online learning formats that are currently being offered through the Zoom platform, for example. Instruction still needs to be personalized for the best possible outcome. Parents and siblings may have to act as the support person with no educational assistants in place. Parents want guidance and a meaningful education program for their child while they are at home for this extended period of time.

Here are some possible suggestions for educational plans with resources that can be constructed and delivered to special needs students at home. Every idea will not be for every student due to their preferences, strengths and learning styles. What can be done will also be dependent on the support that can be provided in the home environment.

An Exercise Plan

There should be a plan for daily exercise. This can be lead by the teacher or a plan can be given for the student to follow. My son is able to follow yoga poses and can do his practice on his own but he has been practicing yoga for many years now. Daily walks are excellent. If a child needs something to focus on while walking, maybe try an object search game like find a twig, a stone, a pine cone, a dog on a leash etc.

Simple calisthenics like jogging on the spot, jumping jacks, squats, balancing on one foot, lunges, and burpees are good ones to try. You can also do these movements to music. Encourage your students to take body breaks throughout the day for a few minutes just to help with regulation and anxiety reduction.

A Relaxation Plan

I have spoken about this in past [blogs](#). When you are all in one place together for an extended period of time, it's important to have some quiet time scheduled in the day or activity can become overwhelming. You can do some deep breathing exercises together, gentle meditation on a mat on the floor to soothing music, and some simple stretches that are held for a minute. For teens, there is a good book that can self-guide with relaxation called [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens](#). For children, [When My Worries Get Too Big](#) is a great choice for developing a relaxation plan. Take advantage of this slower, quieter time in the world to teach this important skill.

Sensory Activities

Sensory activities can work on a variety of skills such as gross motor, fine motor, oral motor and visual perception to list a few. This website gives [150 sensory learning ideas](#), grouped by sensory areas, all using materials you can find at home. You can suggest activities for each student to do based on their sensory profile. If you prefer a book format, I really like the OT Barbara Sher's [ideas](#) as she uses simple materials you can find at home.

You can also suggest some [household chores](#) which can involve lifting, pushing, pulling, movement and fine motor skills. This will also work on life skills too which are an important part of any program.

Fine Arts

The fine arts are a wonderful outlet for self-exploration, creativity and self-expression. They are another channel for communication, showing us a window into a person's world. Experiences in the arts play a valuable role in helping a person to participate fully in the community and in society as a whole. They provide enrichment in life and can be an excellent teaching tool.

Art activities allow a student to be creative and work on fine motor skills. [Simple art activities](#) can be found all over the internet. You can find them divided by age group and ability. If you are looking for projects specifically for students with autism, try this [site](#).

Music is also an important part of any child's education. You can do simple rhythm exercises together using household items for percussion instruments such as tapping two wooden spoons together. Make your [own instruments](#) from recycled items. Clapping patterns, singing together, and dancing are great ways to enjoy music.

For more ideas on how to access the fine arts, click [here](#).

Life Skills

I have written about [critical mass](#) and the time it takes to build a skill to competency. This time at home allows for additional practice time for skills. [Cooking and baking](#) are very popular now. Think about doing a recipe with your class. You could break it down by equipment, how to do things like stir, fold, whisk, and measure. Have your students contribute a favorite recipe. Talk about food groups, spices, herbs, introduce a new fruit or vegetable. Explore where a food comes from or how it grows (in the ground, on a tree, in a bush). This can be done through pictures or YouTube videos. Create shopping lists around a recipe. Have students choose something out of their cupboard to talk about and how they use it at home. Make learning both visual and hands on as much as possible.

Teach the [concept of time](#). There are loads of resources around this topic in the blog post I have linked.

If it is feasible, plant a small indoor garden. We've done this with our son using simple potting soil, a few seeds and containers like [plastic, disposable cups](#) and egg shells sitting in [egg cartons](#). This can be a fun project for a class because they can post pictures and give updates on how the little garden is progressing.

Incorporating Interests

There are many online options to support a student's interest and learning. Find word searches on favorite topics. Our son loves Thomas the Tank Engine. They have a great activities [website](#). Sesame Street also has a teaching [website](#). Search Google by topic keywords to find materials. I've [written](#) about the importance of embracing interests and passions and the benefits of doing so.

Educational Tools and Curriculum Ideas

Because the learning needs of students is so diverse and varies with age and ability, I've made a list of some good websites to access a variety teaching tools and ideas:

- [CBC Parents](#)
- [Council for Exceptional Children](#) (they are offering a free, basic membership until the end of May 2020)
- [Educational Tools List](#)
- [Khan Academy](#)
- A [list](#) of best special education apps and websites
- [7 Websites](#) for Teaching Curriculum to Special Ed. Students
- [At Home Resources for Families](#)

Please reach out if you are looking for something specific for a student and I will do my best to find it for you. This is new territory for all of us and we'll have some days that are more productive than others. The important thing is to have some structure in the day with predictability to reduce anxiety. Keep activities appropriate for both the skill and interest level of the student.

Every idea will not be for every student due to their preferences, strengths and learning styles. What can be done will also be dependent on the support that can be provided in the home environment.



TOY TREASURES

MAKING TOYS AND GAMES FROM RECYCLED ITEMS

In my experience, most children, including those with ASD, don't need expensive toys to be engaged and learn. When children come to us with a diagnosis (learning disabled, autism, global delays, Down Syndrome), we often think we have to buy special equipment to use with them. Not so! I once took a workshop on making toys and games from recycled and everyday household items and was amazed by how much you can do with simple, inexpensive items.

It's easy to lose our ability to play and create amidst technology, products, and gadgets. While I think these things have their place, I'm always surprised to see the creative and clever ways you could use items you have lying around your house.

How do you know what to make your child with autism?

Find out What Motivates Them

The great thing about making your own toys and games is you can tailor-make something to suit a child's interest. Anyone who works with a child often enough will know what motivates and appeals to them. If you aren't sure or you don't know the child well, take some time and observe the child in action.

Key into Their Interests

Do they love shiny things? What is their favorite color? Do they mind getting their [hands dirty or wet](#)? What do they play with – trucks, figurines, blocks?

Use Music and Singing

Most children like [music](#) and enjoy singing so working songs into play, games and routines can help with speech, memory, motivation, or create predictability.

Make What They Need in the Moment, Without Having to Find That Special Toy

The advantage of [do-it-yourself](#) is you can create what is necessary to suit a child's needs in that moment. Do they need a body break? You can quickly find items in your house that will get your child using their body (see the toy ideas below). Do they need something soothing to hold? Again, with observation you will know what kind of items your child would appreciate fiddling with and be able to find something around the house.

Allow Them to Practice Skills

If a child gets involved in [making toys](#), they practice many different skills such as cutting, pasting, stacking, sorting, colouring, holding and grasping different utensils, writing and various other fine motor skills. Toys can incorporate aspects of curriculum too.

Involve the Sensory Systems

The [sensory systems](#) are used in the play process. Play can involve visual tracking, hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, gross motor skills like jumping and hopping, tactile awareness through touching different textures, or playing hidden object games like feel what is in the box and try to guess what it is. Auditory skills can be worked on by placing different objects inside a toilet paper roll, sealing the ends, then shaking the tube and trying to guess what's inside. The possibilities are endless!





Playing Works on Important Social Skills Such as Turn Taking, Cooperation, and Reciprocity

Play is powerful, and an integral part of learning. Taking time in the day to play. Adding music and physical activity to play helps with child development. Most of us learn better by doing and if the learning process is presented in a novel, fun and meaningful way, we're more likely to retain the information. Collaborating with others in creative play also brings out the best in everyone in the room. Two heads are better than one and in this case, several were!

Simple toy ideas you can try at home

1. Why not make a ball out of crumpled up newspaper and masking tape and play a game? I saw one group make a hoop out of newspaper rolled into tubes and taped and toss the ball in several different ways into the hoop.
2. Take a toilet paper roll and place an object inside. Cover both ends and then let your child shake the tube and try to guess what it is. You can also place objects in a bag, and let your child reach in to feel it, and try to guess what's inside. These ideas also work in groups, and can teach cooperative play. Let your child get you to guess as well!
3. I saw one group take their newspaper balls that they had made and play a question/answer game based in a science unit. You could toss the ball to a child and say, "Name something that begins with the letter a" and when they catch the ball, they could say their answer. A child's interest in toys and games may increase too when they become part of the creative and construction process.
4. One woman at one of our workshops made her own version of Mr. Potato Head with a paper bag stuffed with newspaper. She made different eyes and mouth expressions using the lids of jars and juice cans. These could be taken on and off the face to show different emotions. Some people made puppets out of lunch bags but added textured items for sensory play such as yarn, foil, buttons or beads.

For further reading:

-  [*Early Intervention Games*](#)
-  [*Everyday Games for Sensory Processing Disorder: 100 Playful Activities to Empower Children with Sensory Differences*](#)
-  [*Small Steps Forward*](#)
-  [*Stepping Out*](#)



THE LOW AROUSAL APPROACH AT HOME

Two years ago, [Dr. Andrew McDonnell](#), creator and founder of [Studio III UK](#), visited my home to meet my family. He commented that my home embodies the tenets of low arousal. It got me to thinking – what have we done to make it that way? How have we kept life on an even keel with two young adults with autism?

Routines

Since our children have been young, they've had established routines around mealtimes, bedtime, hygiene, getting dressed, weekday and weekend schedules. Weekends are more relaxed, but their daily living routines are still intact. Routines create [predictability](#) and lessen anxiety. They also encourage autonomy. For example, snack time is at 4 pm. At 3:55 pm, my daughter goes to the kitchen and prepares her own snack.

From an early age, we also fostered flexibility by adding the word “surprise” to the visual schedule. This helped the kids to understand that a surprise or something unexpected didn't mean a bad thing; in fact, it could be fun. They are still flexible with schedules as adults.

Our routines have also changed as the kids have aged. Bedtime is now 10:30 pm. With no school anymore, waking up in the morning is a little bit later (and boy, are they happier without the morning rush). Schedules are created to fit their needs and what works best for their body clocks and down times.

If something in the routine is going to change, I would tell the kids the night before if it's something like having to get up earlier. If the change is bigger like going away on a [holiday](#), we start talking about that a couple of weeks in advance. This length of notice can be anxiety provoking for some people; you have to know what works best for your child.

A Quiet Retreat

There are places to go in our home where one can sit quietly and be undisturbed. Our son, Marc, uses his bedroom for this purpose daily. He retreats to read aloud to himself or to meditate to music. Julia wears noise cancelling headphones when she needs complete silence. There are always opportunities to withdraw and regroup throughout the day.

A Predictable Environment

My husband and I also follow routines for ourselves so the kids know what we are doing and when. Marc enjoys looking at my day timer everyday to see what appointments I have. When I am travelling, I leave a detailed schedule of what will happen in my absence.

We don't allow people to drop by unannounced for visits. If people are coming over, we let the kids know in advance who is coming and when. We keep our voices down and never fight in front of the kids. Once they are in bed, we keep the TV low or we do quiet activities like read or practice yoga.

Organization

Having an organized home can maintain a sense of calm. Knowing where things are or where they go after you've used them creates order and predictability. This also fosters independence because if you know where the item lives, it's easy to find and put back. Our books, CD's and videos are organized by topic/genre. Marc's Thomas trains are all in one

big basket in his room. All snacks are located in a central drawer in the kitchen. Hats and gloves are in an easy to reach drawer below the coats.

Why organize the books, DVD's and CD's? We allow our kids access to everything, but that could potentially be overwhelming if there wasn't a system. Both kids think categorically, so arranging "like" items helps them to find what they're interested in independently but also expands on the interest with related topics nearby.

Bedtime

[Sleep issues are often a problem for those with ASD](#) and our kids have been no exception. To encourage better sleep habits, we begin to lessen sensory input two hours before bedtime. There are no TV's on past 8:30 pm. There is no screen time allowed in the bedroom, although there are some screen rituals before the final lights out. Marc watches a few scenes from one movie of his choice on his DVD player for a set time. He then puts the player away and turns out his lights. Julia has some iPad time but that has to be put away outside of her room before bed.

Bath time starts two hours before lights out so that there is plenty of time to unwind and no one feels cheated out of doing things they like to do before bedtime.

Respect

Our home is also our children's home and as parents, we've always believed that Marc and Julia should have a say in their own lives. We've offered them choices from the time they were little, respected their wishes, allowed them to say "no", and gave them access to the things that are in our home. We've supported their interests and helped them expand them so that they don't get bored or stuck. They participate in making their schedule so they can choose what works for them.

Regular Exercise

[Regular exercise alleviates stress](#), lowers anxiety, and helps with sleep. We make sure our kids have regular exercise several times a week. Marc has an at-home yoga program which he is now able to practice on his own.

Teach calming strategies as well. Julia has deep breathing exercises and some calming tools like a [Tangle Toy](#) and Marc meditates with his eyes closed to classical music. We worked on these strategies from the time they were 4 years old.




When Upsets Occur

When there are tense moments or the kids feel upset, there are several strategies that we use. We speak slowly, softly and calmly but overall we try not to talk too much. We reduce household noise, increase personal space, and generally don't touch when agitation is present. Most of the time, we can distract them by mentioning something they like. For Julia, it's talking about our cat, Mr. Darcy.

We don't argue with the kids in the heat of the moment. We also reduce requests or demands when stress levels are rising. I also try to pull back on demands if a transition is occurring. With the end of school, new staff in our home, and new routines going into place, the past 3 months have been about keeping stress levels as low as possible and reducing demands.

Learning about the [Low Arousal Approach](#) finally gave me a name and framework for what we've been practicing in our home for years.

For further reading:

-  [*Managing Family Meltdown*](#)
-  [*No Fighting, No Biting, No Screaming*](#)
-  [*Managing Aggressive Behaviour in Care Settings*](#)



AUTISM X 2 IN ISOLATION

I am the parent of [two children](#), now adults, on the autism spectrum. Marc is 23 and Julia is 21. They've been [out of school](#) for almost 3 years now. We're constantly at work building skills, expanding interests, exploring new recreational activities, volunteering in the community, exercising, cooking and furthering their education. Things were moving along quite well, then COVID-19 hit and our world became a different one. I've started to do some writing on the subject of being [at home](#), living in isolation, and how to keep things on an even keel and moving forward, if possible. My emotions seem to be all over the place – one moment I am fine with these changes, the next I am worried. I fluctuate between anxiousness and calmness, energy and extreme fatigue.

I think we've been doing as well as we have at our house because we had so many [systems](#) and a way of living in place which are compatible with this new and uncertain world we are living in.

What are we doing to cope with our isolation during COVID 19?

Structure and Routine

We've kept Marc and Julia's day as close to what it always has been to keep things [predictable](#). Julia rises at 8 am each morning; Marc at 9 am. Mealtimes, bath time and bedtimes have remained the same. Marc has an "at home" outfit that he wears when no activities are on – sweatpants and a white t-shirt. He changes into this every morning; however, when any online class happens, he changes into his going out outfit which is jeans and a t-shirt. This is because he knows there are social rules that guide his dress code. If he will be visible on camera, he knows he has to be presentable.

Julia has experienced a higher level of anxiety around COVID-19, so we've said it's fine to have some days that are pyjama days because she finds that comforting. She has still retained the flexibility to get dressed for some at home activities like baking.

Meals

Marc has wanted to be more adventurous with eating new things at dinnertime. I ask him in the afternoon if he wants to try what I am going to make and if he says yes, then he eats the new dish with great enthusiasm. I still go back to his old dinner favorites to keep him anchored – that way he knows the old favorites are always there to fall back on. His newest eating adventure has been salads – why? Because he makes a salad with his online horticulture class every Wednesday afternoon, then he wants to eat it that night. I've talked about this [buy in](#) to new foods which can happen when the individual is part of the preparation and cooking process.

Julia wants no changes in her diet as she would find this stressful. My concern with her is food shortages because some stores are frequently out of her staples such as rice pasta and plain pasta sauce. I try to have a few back ups of alternate foods that she will eat such as a chicken noodle soup. I find the key to keeping meals stress-free is letting her know ahead of time that her meal will be different and I explain why that is.

Exercise

We've had an unseasonably cold spring with lots of snow and below average temperatures. My two won't go out in this kind of weather and have never been walkers around the neighbourhood. We came up with a Wii Fit workout plan for Julia since she loves the Wii. Julia was anxious on the first day because she didn't know how long to workout. We agreed on a time of 20 minutes and set the alarm on her phone. Not knowing when an activity will end is often anxiety provoking so it's important to have some way to define the beginning and end of an activity or task.

Marc is doing Wii Fit Plus and loves to jog. He began jogging in an adapted fitness course he took through the city. On Wednesdays, Marc does his [yoga practice](#) which he has done with an instructor for years. These two activities work for him because they are familiar and he has had previous instruction in order to be independent.

When the weather gets nicer, I hope we can add [biking](#) to the weekly roster. Using the bicycles built for two will ensure safety and social distancing which my children would have some trouble doing on their own and quickly, which can happen in a cycling situation.

[Leisure Activities](#)

Once week on Thursday mornings, the kids play board games like Kerplunk, Guess Who, Mouse Trap, Trouble and Don't Wake Daddy. Julia really talks a lot during this time and loves cause and effect games. Card games are fun too. Marc will only play certain games like Kerplunk and then he wants to go. He doesn't enjoy many board games and prefers more solitary pursuits like coloring and reading aloud. We respect that and let him pursue what makes him happy.

We do allow computer access all day. Marc limits his screen time; Julia does not. We found a [writing site](#) for Julia to create stories. She enjoys sharing her stories on a platform and the feedback she gets. Julia also checks in with her cat charity everyday to see what new cats have come in and who has been adopted or which cat had kittens. This keeps her connected to her volunteer job.

Marc reads aloud every day for about 4 hours a day. Right now, he is reading about Johnny Cash. He adds to his experience by listening to Johnny Cash CD's. Julia won't read on her own, but we worked together to [choose a book](#) that I will read with her each day. She wanted a simple book so I suggested one that also had a cat in it, her favorite subject matter. I am sticking with her [interests](#) but am looking for ways to engage with her away from the computer.

Julia and her dad spend some time each day playing Wii games together. They talk a lot during this activity and Julia has success with these games. It's fun to beat dad!

Julia also enjoys baking so we bake simple things for the family like muffins, squares and cookies. She feels great pride in helping to feed the family. This has been a regular weekly activity since school ended so we're just keeping it going. I'd like to try bread next.

The Arts

My husband, Ron, is a professional pianist who plays a concert on the piano for us every single day. Marc's way of connecting with this is to go into his room and pick a CD by the same composer and listen to that while Ron is playing a different work. These musical interludes keep the house feeling very alive each day. There is nothing quite like music to soothe the soul!

Julia sings 30 minutes of karaoke every night. This is done in my office with the door closed which is everyone's signal not to enter. She is starting to explore musicals online and adds new songs to her singing repertoire every week.

Saturday night is Netflix night; Julia looks for a new movie to watch. Marc watches DVDs throughout the week, but chooses ones based on the cast. This is often related to watching a celebrity interview from an Oprah Winfrey show on YouTube. Speaking of YouTube, Marc has been revisiting old documentaries that he watched when he was in elementary school like Floating Palaces and Transatlantic Liners. He has fond memories of these programs and they are giving him comfort right now.

Self-Care

As a full-time caregiver with almost no breaks now, taking care of myself is more important than ever. I go for a walk 3 – 4 days a week, read (something not autism related), take webinars, do free online courses on fun topics through [Future Learn](#), cook, keep up with friends, write, workout online with my figure skating group, attend online socials with friends, and find interesting things to stream in the evening. There is no TV on before 5 pm and there are quiet times throughout the day. The kids start getting ready for bed at 9 pm and retreat to their rooms after baths until lights out at 10:45 pm.

No one knows how long this isolation will last. While living like this, it's important to maintain a structure to the day, uphold routines, and engage in activities that are comforting. It can take weeks for a new routine to become habit so be patient with the changes and wait for new patterns to take hold. Some days will be better than others. Be kind and gentle on yourself and your loved ones. This too shall pass.



Maureen Bennie

Maureen has co-authored books and written over 200 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters and on websites throughout North America and the UK.

Maureen Bennie created the Autism Awareness Centre in 2003 to address what she saw as a gap in support, information, resources and advocacy for those struggling with [autism spectrum disorders](#). For Maureen, education and knowledge brings positive change to the lives of those affected by autism spectrum disorders.

Maureen is the mother of two young adults with autism – Marc and Julia. For 8 years, she managed an at-home Intensive Behavioral Intervention Program which involved working with speech pathologists, child development specialists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists.

Maureen has written over 200 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters, and on websites throughout North America and the UK. She is also an active presenter throughout Canada on autism topics.

Maureen presents on book resources and how to use them, topics in autism, creates book lists for various audiences, writes book reviews for publishers, assesses libraries at organizations and tells them what areas they are lacking up to date information in. She was a contributing author for the [SAGE Handbook of Autism and Education](#) published by SAGE, in September 2019.

[Maureen's weekly blog](#) post topics range from her personal experience as a parent of two children on the autism spectrum to detailed coverage of top news stories, events, and resources concerning autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

Maureen's writing provides peer-to-peer support and information for educational and advocacy purposes only. As she is not a medical professional, Maureen's writing should not be seen as providing medical advice.

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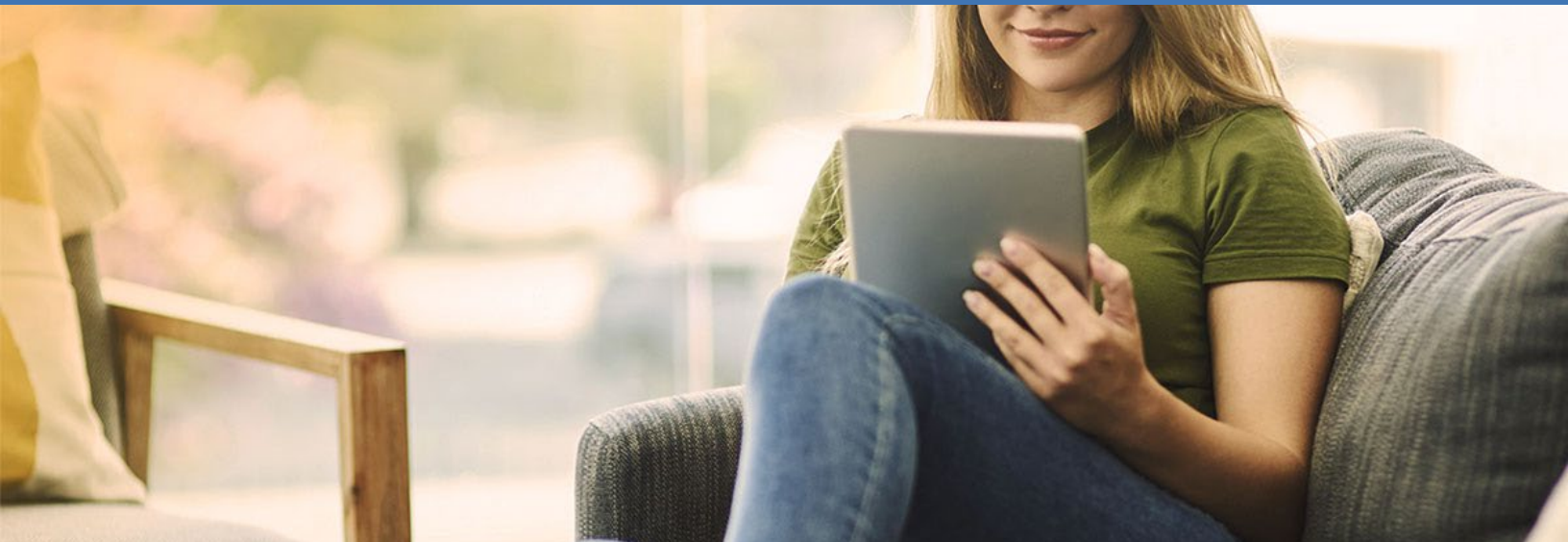
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ANNOUNCING AUTISM AWARENESS CENTRE'S LINE OF E-BOOKS

A Message From Maureen

After years of receiving thousands of e-mails, comments, and questions about my blogs, I decided it was time to put together a high-level introduction to some of my most asked about topics. With over 20 years of experience raising a son and a daughter with ASD and working in the autism field, I wanted to share my knowledge and discoveries, my failures and my successes.

This series of introductory e-books are designed to help you quickly assimilate information and strategies that can be applied immediately to home, school or community settings. These e-books highlight personal stories and anecdotes from my experience, while also providing references and resources for delving deeper into a topic should you wish to do so.

These books are about empowering parents, caregivers and professionals to act in positive and effective ways while supporting individuals with ASD. It is their health, well-being, and happiness that we must keep at the forefront of our thoughts and actions.

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