



Effective School Solutions

**Supporting Stress and
Mental Health in Students
with Autism During
COVID 19**

A Toolkit for Caregivers and Providers

Table of Contents

I.	<u>Introduction</u>	Page 3
II.	<u>The 5 Support Strategies</u>	Page 4
III.	<u>Understanding and Communication</u>	Page 5
IV.	<u>Coping Skills</u>	Page 8
V.	<u>Maintaining and Creating Routines</u>	Page 11
VI.	<u>Promoting Socialization</u>	Page 15
VII.	<u>Monitor Behavioral Change</u>	Page 17
VIII.	<u>References</u>	Page 19

Introduction

Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often struggle in many different areas of their lives. The primary symptoms of the disorder include difficulties with communication, social interaction and restricted interests. In addition, students with Autism may also have a high need for order and stability, engage in repetitive behaviors, exhibit sensitivity to sensory input, and take part in sensation-seeking behaviors.

At Effective School Solutions, we take pride in our ability to offer life-changing services that allow young people with autism to live more autonomous lives. Our compassionate staff is dedicated to helping these students so that they and their caregivers can learn to effectively navigate the Autism Spectrum in addition to any mental health needs including individualized barriers that may occur.

During this unprecedented time of change and ambiguity, we want to offer caregivers and professionals some strategies to help assist the students in our lives that we care so deeply about. While this toolkit is just a guide of possible suggestions, and is by no means intended to be a replacement for educational or therapeutic services, we do hope that you find it helpful.

“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory”

- Dr. Seuss

The 5 Support Strategies

Throughout the following pages we will discuss the 5 support strategies Effective School Solutions designed to assist in meeting the unique needs of individuals with autism during this period of ambiguity. The primary goal of these strategies is to reduce stress, and aide in the retention o positive mental health. We have included examples and ready-made resources to help caregivers and professionals implement these strategies quickly and easily. Feel free to individual these strategies and resources to best meet the varied needs of the children and young adults in your lives.

These strategies are intended to be a suggested toolkit of ideas that you may find helpful. The strategies are not contingent upon one another and may be used in an a la carte fashion. Caregivers and professionals may opt to start with a strategy they have used successfully in the past, or they may prefer to begin with a tool to address the issue that is creating the most immediate stress at the given time.

Whenever possible, include the student in the decision-making process about what tools would be most helpful.

Strategy #1:

Understanding and Communication

In times of increased stress, it is a normal human reaction to find ourselves struggling with no being able to articulate how we are feeling. Finding the right words to describe our internal affective state can be quite challenging. Adding to that the fact that by the very definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder, students with Autism may have difficulty with expressive and language, may have a limited emotional vocabulary, may struggle with pragmatic communication, or a myriad of other communication related complexities. These underlying communication issues create an added barrier to being able to fully express and possibly understand the ever-shifting changes in our current circumstances.

Sudden and unexpected changes can also be quite difficult for students with Autism. These sudden and unexplainable changes can illicit stress related feelings. For individuals who are unable to express these internal states through words, they may be able to express them via non-verbal means. Behavior is a form of communication, and is particularly important when a child is preverbal, has no language or has neither the developmental level or psychological capacities to “tell us” how they are doing or feeling.

Some alternative ways in which students with Autism may express their feelings can include (but is not limited to...):

- Meltdowns
- Tantrums
- Refusing to take part in activities
- Withdrawal
- Increased sensory sensitivity or avoidance
- Increased perseverative behaviors

What can you do?

Increase the opportunities for all family members to express their feelings, as they are able.

- Create times throughout the day for family “talks”. You may choose to start your day with a family meeting. This semi-structured time can allow for review of the schedule and expectations for the day, to check in to see how everyone is feeling, and to review ways each family member can be supported that day. An evening family “talk” during or after dinner, can be

another great opportunity to reflect on the day and check in with one another.

- **Writing Activities:** For some individuals who struggle with verbal communication, writing can be a helpful outlet. Creating daily newsletters, in which each member of the family can be a contributor, is a fun way to explore feelings and to process the events around us. Caregivers can also opt to “assign” daily journal prompts such as “What frustrated me the most today was.... I was able to handle my frustration by... Tomorrow, if this frustrates me again I can...”
- **Movie making:** Some individuals excel in the area of technology. Using this skill strength to express and process our feelings can be an extremely helpful tool. Students can be as creative as their means allow (live action, stop motion using favorite toys, even animation through drawing).
- **Music play lists:** Sometimes the words just don't come to us, nor are we able to accurately express how we are feeling through non-verbal means. Creating a play list of songs that represent how we are feeling, can not only help others to understand our internal state, but also help us to validate those feelings. Create a variety of play lists (Happy, sad, angry, etc.) to represent a full spectrum of emotions.
- **Play:** Play is one of the most natural ways through which children learn how to understand and cope with difficult and complex feelings and situations. Allow your child the opportunity to play out their experiences. Through play, many children feel safe enough to explore difficult and unpleasant experiences. Become a play partner, ask questions through play in order to help your child work through things they may be struggling with.

As mentioned earlier, words themselves are only a small piece of how feelings and needs can be communicated. In addition to the suggestions listed above, alternative forms of expression such as visual arts, movement, music, and dance can also be helpful ways for all family members to process and express complex emotions.

Resources for Strategy 1

- **Zine Making:** A Zine (pr. ZEEN) is a homemade publication about anything that you are interested in. The content and appearance of a Zine is completely up to the creator! Follow this link for a kid friendly DIY guide: <https://www.readbrightly.com/how-to-make-zine/>
- **101 Art Therapy Activities:** Art therapy is a distinct discipline that incorporates creative methods of expression through visual art media. <https://intuitivecreativity.typepad.com/expressiveartinspirations/100-art-therapy-exercises.html>

Do's and Don'ts for Encouraging Your Child's Creativity

Don't Follow Directions That's right. While learning to follow directions is an important skill for children, too much direction can stunt the creative process. What young kids need in order to develop a sense of self-expression is the chance to make their own decisions in their artwork and play.

Do Choose Materials Carefully Try to stay away from coloring books or kits that come with premade pieces or specific directions. The most basic supplies are often the best ones for encouraging creativity. A plain sketchbook, a variety of colored pencils, or an assortment of papers can lead to open-ended trial-and-error style exploration. For creative play, allow your child to engage in open ended creative play that stimulates the imagination. Dolls, cars, even Legos can be great. While games with rules can be fun for a family game night, they limit the child's ability to explore limits and boundaries freely.

Don't Ask, "Is that a flower?" Adults often want to know what a child is creating, but that's not how young minds operate. It's better to describe what you see—what colors were used, how the lines go, actions taken ("that car hit the other car") and invite the child to tell you about it in their own words.

Do Take Risks When a child is not given specific directions on what to make, or how to play they are able to experiment with what they can imagine. Some of the greatest creations occur by accidental exploration. Creativity is the freest form of self-expression. There is nothing more satisfying and fulfilling for children than to be able to express themselves openly and without judgement.

Strategy #2:

Coping Skills

During times of ambiguity, being able to access and utilize coping skills is a priority for all students. Ideally, most students with Autism will already have some, if not a compilation of, coping skills in their repertoire that they can tap into during times of stress.

Some examples of coping skills your student may already utilize are:

- Rocking (in a chair or otherwise)
- Deep breathing
- Listening to music or soothing sounds (with or without headphones)
- Short periods of robust activity (jumping, spinning, running, etc.)
- Taking a bath or shower
- Watching a preferred movie/TV show/video clip
- Time with a favorite toy, or object
- Snuggling with a pet (real or stuffed)
- Deep pressure or massage
- Sensory play (fidgets, etc.)

Whether your student already has established coping skills, or if you will be assisting them in the development of new skills during this time, the following suggestions can be used to maximize the effectiveness of coping skills:

- Purposefully choose times of the day when the student is calm and relaxed to introduce and/or practice skills. Learning skills in a calm state is essential. Think of it like a fire drill. We never practice a fire drill when there is a fire. Instead we practice fire drills in the absence of danger, in the effort to turn skills into an unconscious act. This should be the same practice for learning coping skills. Practice the skills frequently, when the student is not under stress, so that the skills become second nature and are more easily accessed during times of stress.
- Create a concrete, clearly understood, visual schedule/routine to support the ongoing use of skills throughout the day. Include “coping activity” times into the student’s structured daily schedule (to be discussed in Strategy #3).
- Make Sure the student has full access to their skills throughout the day. A coping skill is only as effective as the student’s ability to access it. For example, if the student is restricted to playing video games to after school (or the completion of a task) then video games are not an effective coping skill. Breathing is a coping skill that the student can take with them wherever

they go. However, if they are not allowed to engage in deep breathing (for whatever reason), then it too is no longer an effective coping skill. Coping skills are considered a need, not a want, and therefore the student should have unlimited access to them. Be mindful of what coping skills the student will be using, whether or not they are appropriate, and how you will support their access to those skills.

Resources for Strategy 2

Mindfulness apps:

- [Calm](#)
- [Breathe Think Do with Sesame](#)
- [Mindfulness Podcasts](#)

Guided Imagery:

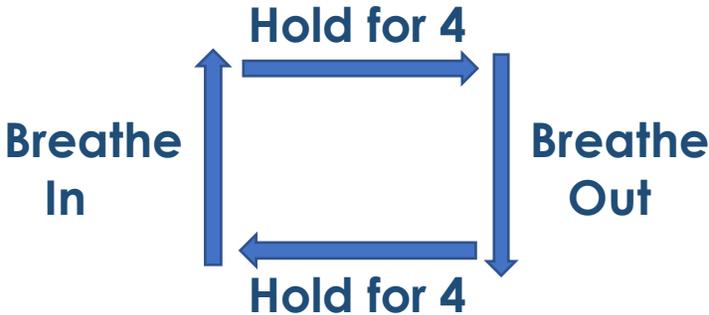
- The Indigo Child by Lori Lite (Amazon Music)
- The Indigo Teen by Lori Lite (Amazon Music)
- [Your Safe Space \(for Teens\)](#)
- [Your Secret Treehouse \(for children\)](#)
- [Land of the Unicorns \(for Children\)](#)

Yoga:

- [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#)
- [Yoga for Teenagers](#)

Movement:

- [GoNoodle](#)

1-2-3 Calming Routine		✓
1	<p>Slowly Count to 10</p> <p>1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10</p>	
2	<p>Squeeze a stress ball</p> <p>Squeeze → Release Squeeze</p> <p>Release</p>	
3	<p>Take 3 Square Breaths</p>  <p>Hold for 4</p> <p>Breathe In</p> <p>Breathe Out</p> <p>Hold for 4</p>	

Strategy #3:

Maintaining and Creating Routines

Maintaining Routines: Many individuals with Autism cope best when daily routines are only minimally interrupted or altered. Routines provide increased comfort and are of even more importance during times of stress. Routines are one of the best tools for combatting anxiety and worry. Even with the new COVID-19 restrictions, there are some daily routines that do not need to be changed. For example:

- Sleep/wake times and routines
- Hygiene routines
- Household chore routines
- Meal times and routines
- Entertainment routines

Creating New Routines: It will most likely be necessary to create some new routines in order to accommodate remote learning, curfews, social distancing and other COVID-19 related changes. Some examples of potential new routine may be:

- **Screen time use and transitions:** This does not include screen time used for remote education, telehealth, or socialization. Transitioning from technological devices can be difficult for students with Autism under the most desirable of circumstances, transition difficulties may be exacerbated when the student is under stress.
 - o Establish clear boundaries, expectations and rules relating to screen time and use. Define what screen time means to the student, the amount of screen time allotted for the day, whether or not screen time is earned and if so how is it earned, when they can engage in screen time, and what the expectation is for transitioning off of screen time. Include screen time in the student's daily schedule.
 - o Prior to starting screen time, and when giving prompting at the end of screen time, remind the student of the next activity. The activity following screen time should never be an undesirable activity.
 - o Use a visual timer. This provides a concrete time limit, as well as an ongoing reminder of how much time the student has left. Give reminders as needed (5 minutes left... 1-minute left).
- **Daily schedules:** Structuring the student's day ahead of time is a highly effective way to help reduce anxiety associated with ambiguity. This is even more important when changes beyond our control continue to shift each

day. Structure provides the student with a sense of boundary and control. When creating new routines/schedules remember to include the student in the planning process as much as possible. When possible, offer them choices for activities, as well as the time frame in which they would like to complete something (e.g., would you like to do math during morning academics or after lunch?).

- **Remote Learning:** If you can, create a special workspace free from distractions that can be used for academics only. Creating to-do lists for each academic subject time, that the student can check off when each item is completed, can also assist in the understanding of the task at hand. Many individuals with Autism struggle with executive functioning and organization. Some academic tasks may seem too overwhelming when presented as a whole. Breaking the task up into smaller more attainable tasks can help to reduce anxiety and frustration.

Resources:

Sample of Academic To Do Lists

Today's Math To Do's		
	Step	
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
FINISHED!!!		

Sample Daily Schedule

Time	Activity	Instructions
6:30 AM	Wake up	
6:30-6:45	Morning Hygiene	Ex. Brush teeth, wash face, wash hands, clean up bathroom, get dressed for the day
6:45-7:00	Breakfast	Make and eat cereal
7:00-7:45	Review schedule	Student will add choices for breaks at this time
7:30-7:45	Morning check in with ESS	Via telephone or Zoom. Clinician will check in and

1:00-1:30	Special	Art, Culinary, technology, music, virtual field trip, etc.
1:30-1:45	Earned Break	Student will choose from list of 3 predetermined options (read a book, play a card game, draw). Student and adult will create a list of break activities ahead of time
1:45-2:00	Afternoon Snack	
2:00-2:20	ESS Session	
2:20-3:00	Free time	Time should be loosely structures. Student chooses from predetermined options
3:00-4:00	House chores	Wash dishes, take out the trash, fold laundry, clean room
4:00-5:00	Screen time	Video games etc
5:00-5:30	Peer social time	Face time, telephone
5:30-6:00	Dinner	
6:00-6:30	Family time	Board games, go for a walk
6:30-7:30	Free time	Time should be loosely structures. Student chooses from predetermined options
7:30-8:00	Family/Peer time	TV, games, face time...
8:00-8:30	Evening Hygiene	Bath, brush teeth, put on pajamas, lay out clothes for the next day
8:30-9:00	Bedtime transition	Read a book, listen to music
9:00	Bedtime	

Strategy #4:

Promoting Socialization

While positive social support is important for everyone some individuals with autism may be more sensitive to feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Restrictions put in place in response to COVID 19, such as quarantine and social distancing can exacerbate these feelings. Individuals with autism may need more concrete assistance to ensure that social connections continue throughout this time. Caregivers and professionals should check in and (whenever possible) monitor online social interactions to ensure student safety.

Suggested tools for promoting positive social connectedness:

- Build in scheduled daily opportunities for social connectedness. Create a list of family members, peers, professionals, etc. with whom the student can schedule times to “meet” with via formats such as Skype, Zoom, or FaceTime. Telephone calls and texting are other possible avenues for connecting. However, being able to “see” the other person increases the social connectedness and has been shown to decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- If your student does not have a list of individuals they can connect with, elicit the assistance of your student's teachers, child study team, and therapists. These professionals may have access to other students with similar social needs they can connect your student with. Many professionals are also in the process of establishing virtual social groups for students with autism. As this is new and uncharted territory for many, these platforms are still in development. Student safety is of the utmost priority, so please make sure any online social outlets are fully vetted.

Resources:

Steps to Calling with Facetime

1. Select the Facetime App
2. Select who to call
3. Wait for them to answer
4. Talk with them. You can ask questions like:
 - a. "How are you today?"
 - b. "What have you been doing while at home?"
 - c. "Have you watched any good movies/TV shows/videos?"
5. Say Goodbye
6. Disconnect from Facetime

List of Free Video Chat Apps:

1. Facetime
2. Zoom
3. Skype
4. Marco Polo
5. Google Hangouts

Strategy #5: Monitor Behavioral Change

Many individuals struggle with, and may not be able to, verbally express their feelings relating to the ongoing changes. Sometimes these emotions may be expressed via behavioral changes or shifts. Caregivers are the experts on their student, you know your child best. You have the most intimate knowledge of your child's behavioral baseline and will be best able to detect even the slightest of changes. It is important that you share this information with the professionals in your student's life. Some behavioral changes that may be indicative of anxiety or depression to be on the lookout for may include:

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in eating patterns
- Excessive worry or ruminations
- Increased clinginess
- Increased nightmares
- Increased withdrawal
- Increased agitation or irritability
- Decreased engagement in highly desired activities
- Increased meltdowns
- Increased tantrums
- Increased perseverative behaviors
- Regression

If these behaviors are observed, or if you simply have concerns related to your child's emotional state, reach out to the professionals in your life for assistance. You are not in this alone.

Examples of Professionals:

- Medical:
 - o Primary care physician
 - o Private therapists (Psychologist, Psychiatrist, Clinicians, ABA, Speech, Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist)
 - o Effective School Solutions Clinician
- Educational:
 - o Child Study Team (Case Manager, School Social Worker, School Counselor, School Psychologist)
 - o Teachers

Resources:

- **NAMI National Helpline/Warmline Directory:**
<https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/BlogImageArchive/2020/NAMI-National-HelpLine-WarmLine-Directory-3-11-20.pdf>
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Disaster Distress Hotline:**
Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**
1-800-273-8255
- **MHS Tips for Parents:** http://info.mhs.com/digital-resource-toolkit?utm_campaign=CE-COVID%2019%20Updates&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=84932723&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-9xFfFUabTXHLGOO6xxDVcX5ZlvnncHCcUFUu7ToOkRRwB8bmpbaHGH77-Nm0p4MtkgAXJuu0RkAqhDYPSFU-3yxqmS2Q&_hsmi=84932723#Transition-School-Home
(This link provides a number of free resources that can be helpful during this time. Areas include Psycho-Education, Treatment Resources, Guidance for families, and the Transition from School to Home/ remote learning)
- **Additional Technological Resources for Children that have Special Needs:**
<https://www.controlaltachieve.com/2016/10/special-needs-extensions.html?m=1>
(This link provides free resources for applications to assist with accommodations/ learning.)
- **Free Behavior Chart App:**
<https://www.freeprintablebehaviorcharts.com/behavior-charts.htm>
(This link provides a free resource for creating visual behavior charts.)

References:

Hedges, S., White, T., & Smith, L. (2014, May). Depression in adolescents with ASD (Autism at-a-Glance Brief). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.

Hedges, S., White, T., & Smith, L. (2015, February). Anxiety in adolescents with ASD (Autism at-a-Glance Brief). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.

Hume, K., Regan, T., Megronigle, L., & Rhinehalt, C. (2016). Supporting students with autism spectrum disorder through grief and loss. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 48(3), 128-136.

National Child Traumatic Child Stress Network. (2020). Parent/caregiver guide to helping families cope with the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) At https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/factsheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

Wong, C., Odom, S. L., Hume, K. Cox, A. W., Fettig, A., Kucharczyk, S., ... Schultz, T. R. (2014). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism spectrum disorder.