

Solutions Newsletter

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Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Helping Neurodiverse Students Manage Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of students across the United States and around the world. While all students and their families were affected by numerous school disruptions, some were affected more than others, including those children who are considered "neurodiverse".

Neurodiversity (ND) refers to non-pathological variations in the human brain regarding social functioning, learning, attention, mood, and other mental capacities. Students with ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and those who have Tourette's or other tic disorders are just a few who are considered neurodiverse.

Neurologically diverse students tend to struggle in many different areas of their lives. Many have difficulties with communication, social interactions, and restricted interests. They often have a high need for order and stability, engage in repetitive behaviors, exhibit sensitivity to sensory input, and take part in sensation-seeking behaviors. The experience of being ND frequently involves bullying and social isolation and having less input than others due to social and communication deficits. ND students also suffer from increased anxiety and depression, and frequently have lower confidence and self-esteem because of the difficulties associated with navigating the world around them.

Both school personnel and parents are reporting increased mental health symptoms and skill regression in many neurodiverse students because of pandemic related stressors. Effective School Solutions (ESS) has developed a 5-pronged approach to supporting neurodiverse students, and we encourage parents to consider these categories of intervention.

Strategy 1: Enhancing Understanding and Communication

In times of increased stress, it is helpful for humans to identify and verbalize feelings. Help your child by:

- Scheduling daily opportunities to practice identifying and verbalizing feelings. These times can also include a review of the day's schedule and teaching your child how to advocate for the type of support he/she needs that day.
- Create multiple opportunities for non-verbal self-expression. These might include writing activities, such as a daily family newsletter, or individual journaling or scrapbooking. Tapping your child's technical interests and skills can also be useful – encourage him/her to create movies or develop music play lists with songs that represent a full range of human emotions.
- Encourage therapeutic play and self-expression through the visual arts and movement (e.g., dance, yoga, exercise).

Strategy 2: Developing and Supporting Coping Skills

When confronted with novel or ambiguous situations, individuals need to access and utilize healthy coping strategies. Help your child create a personal list of coping skills and remind him/her to use them as needed. Some examples are rocking, deep breathing, listening to music or soothing sounds, engaging in short periods of robust activity (e.g., jumping), taking a bath or shower, watching a video clip, and snuggling with a pet.

Strategy 3: Maintaining and Creating Routines

Neurodiverse individuals cope best when daily routines are consistent. Routines provide increased comfort and can help children tolerate anxiety and worry. Daily routines include sleep/wake times, hygiene routines, times for household chores, mealtimes, screen time, and leisure routines. Parents can:

- Create and frequently review daily schedules. Include your child in the planning process as much as possible, e.g., "do you want to watch YouTube videos before or after you do your chores for the day?"
- Use verbal and visual "countdown" methods to help transition from one activity to another, e.g., "10 minutes left", "5 minutes left", etc.

Strategy 4: Promoting Socialization

Positive social support is important for everyone, but some ND individuals may need more concrete assistance to ensure the continuity of social connections. Help your child create a list of family members, peers, professionals, and trusted adults at school, church, etc. with whom they can "meet" either in person or via video formats such as Zoom or FaceTime.

Strategy 5: Monitor Behavioral Change

ND students often express their emotions through behavior. Parents should communicate regularly with school personnel and treating providers about even the slightest shifts or changes as these may indicate an increase of anxiety or depression.

Resources:

[How Can We Help Kids with Transitions? – Child Mind Institute](#)