

Trying to explain to your child why he/she can’t attend school when it’s not a holiday or summer break can be complicated and confusing for the child. What adds to the confusion is that your child will miss going to his/her favourite places within the community.

During this dramatic change, please keep a couple of things in mind.

1. Our children feel the non-verbal anxiety and stress of the world more strongly, so when you are interacting with your child, it is essential to stay calm and positive.
2. Being at home with your child will take a lot of patience, creativity, resourcefulness, and positivity. Do what you need to do to care for yourself, whether it be waking up early and taking a walk around the block, drinking that extra cup of coffee, or binge-watching a Netflix show while your child is asleep. Your mindset and interactions with your child will affect how your child will adapt to this significant change.

# It’s essential to create a daily schedule

The first thing I highly recommend for every family to do is to create a daily schedule. There are many sample schedules you can find online that you can modify to fit your lifestyle. If your child can participate in creating the daily plan, let him/her provide input because his/her opinion is valuable. When creating a schedule, do not schedule an activity for longer than 45 minutes.

Provide lots of sensory and gross motor breaks to get your child up and moving. Add in self-help skills like dressing, bathing, brushing teeth, bathroom breaks, eating meals, etc. Also, add in brain breaks. During this time, it is okay for your child to engage in self-stimulatory behaviours and screen time. It allows for both you and your child to take a break from one another and decompress. To help transition your child from one activity to another, use the timer on your phone.

Using a timer is always helpful because it lets your child know when the activity is over. Each morning, pre-set all the transition times on your phone timer to keep you on track with the daily schedule. Give a verbal warning right before the timer goes off. For example, “In two minutes, when the timer goes off, we will clean up and start writing.” You can sing a transitional song during the transition, such as a “Clean Up” song.

Once you create a schedule, STICK TO IT! Children with autism like sameness and routine—they thrive on it. Even if you are bored with the schedule you create, trust me, your child is not. Sameness will not only keep your child calm, but it helps YOU stay accountable and structured.

Creating a homeschool schedule can be quite overwhelming. My advice is to look at the goals in your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or service plan and find worksheets or activities online to help support those goals. Also, create a personal goal that you would like your child to accomplish during the next two to three weeks. Whether the goal is for your child to learn to write his/her name or learn to dress him/herself, you will be amazed at what can be learned while at home.

Since there are so many homeschool activities to choose from, I have created a list of activities that I have found to be beneficial. These activities are divided into five categories: sensory, gross motor, fine motor, games, and self-help skills. The great thing about these activities is that you don’t have to buy expensive material to implement them. All you have to do is find simple objects around your house. The one positive to come out of social distancing is that the social bond between you and your child becomes even stronger.

## 1. Sensory play

Sensory play is wonderful because it encourages children to use five senses: sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing. Some ideas of sensory activities are blowing bubbles and having your child chase and pop them. Put shaving cream on a table and have your child draw or write letters and numbers.

There are so many online recipes that explain how to make your own slime, foam slime, moon sand, cloud dough, etc. Now is the ideal time to make it together and have your child play with it. Fill a plastic bin with water beads and hide small zoo animals, dinosaurs, or whatever your child likes and then have your child find them. Each week change out the materials in the bin to shredded paper, pasta, sand, etc.

## 2. Gross motor activities

Gross motor activities focus on strengthening your child’s core while working on leg and arm coordination and muscle development. You can create an obstacle course inside or outside. Some ideas for an obstacle course include having your child walk on tape (works on balancing), throw a ball into a basket (works on eye-hand coordination), and crawl under a rope. Take physical brain breaks by having your child hop like a frog, crab crawl, elephant stomp, wheelbarrow walk, or running and crashing into couch cushions.

Have your child help you with physical chores like moving chairs or carrying a laundry basket. These are great ways to help your child meet his/her sensory needs.

## 3. Fine motor skills

Fine motor skills are important because they help with writing and self-help skills. Some fun activities are to look up a Play-Doh recipe on the Internet, make it with your child, and then play with it. You can work on finger and hand strengthening skills by rolling the dough into tiny balls or making animals like snakes. Hide objects like small beads or coins in the Play-Doh and have your child find them.

Another simple activity involves just stickers and paper. Randomly place dots all over the paper with a pen or marker. Have your child put stickers (choose favourite characters or objects) on top of the dots.

Make it educational by making the dots into shapes, letters, and numbers and have your child put the stickers on the dots to create the shape, letter, and/or number. Teach your child how to colour within the lines and how to use an appropriate pincer grip.

Print out simple colouring pages (ones with not a lot of detail) and thicken the lines with a black marker or crayon. By darkening the lines and making them thicker, your child can identify the boundaries of where to colour. Then get crayons and break them into small pieces. Breaking the crayons into small pieces forces your child to use the appropriate pincer grip when colouring. You can begin to teach the concept of cutting and using scissors by snipping Play-Doh, moon sand, or straws.

To encourage writing, draw shapes, write numbers and letters, or write your child’s name on a piece of paper and have your child trace it. Finally, you can have your child bead his/her own fidget bracelet or necklace by using a pipe cleaner and macaroni.

## 4. Games

Games promote the concept of turn-taking and following rules. Now is the perfect time to teach the concept of playing games in a 1:1 setting. When your child goes back to school, he/she will have the basic turntaking skills to play games with peers. When teaching turn-taking, start with games that have simple rules and games that promote the “my turn/your turn” concept. You can begin by doing puzzles within your house and taking turns putting puzzle pieces together.

You can also print out colouring pages and take turns colouring.

Some simple turn-taking games to play include Don’t Break the Ice, Honey Bee Tree, Memory, and any matching game. Fun physical games are Freeze Dance and Red Light Green Light in which you can pair a visual with physical activity. For example, holding up a green piece of paper means start dancing, jumping, running, etc. and holding up a red piece of paper means to stop.

To get some of your child’s wiggles out, you can teach the concept of chase and tag. To start, have your child walk or run after you and prompt him/her to tag you, then turn around and walk or run after your child and tag. Continue to do that back and forth until you increase distance and speed. Tag is the most foundational play skill to have because a lot of play on the playground revolves around tag and chase. Once your child enjoys playing simple games, you can begin to teach games with more complex rules such as Candy Land, Hideand-Seek, and Simon Says.

## 5. Self-help skills

Self-help skills are critical because they not only help your child become more independent, but they help promote problem-solving skills. Each week you can decide on one or two self-help skills you would like your child to work on. Once you choose, it will be essential to break down the self-help skill step by step and teach it in small sequential steps and then chain the steps together.

For instance, if you would like to teach your child how to dress independently, you wouldn’t teach him/her how to put on socks and pants first, but how to put on the shirt independently. Once your child can put his/her shirt on independently, teach him/her how to put on pants. Next, you put on the socks but have your child put on the pants and shirt independently. Continue to do this procedure until your child can dress on his/her own.

Some additional self-help skills to work on are washing hands, brushing teeth, tying shoes, opening and closing a lunch box and/or backpack, using utensils or a napkin, etc. If your child needs visuals to help him/her, look online as there are many free downloadable visuals for each of these self-help skills that break down the skills into small sequential steps.

Now is the time to mind shift and think of all the positives that will come out of this unexpected break. This is a time for you to connect with your child socially as well as teach him/her life skills that will prepare him/her for the future. When finding homeschool activities for your child, it is vital to not only find activities your child enjoys but ones that also provide the structure needed to be successful.

If your child isn’t into an activity, move on and find something your child likes. By choosing activities that your child prefers, he/she will stay engaged with that activity as well as strengthen the social connection with you. The ultimate goal of this break is to make memorable social connections with your child while learning and having fun.

The above is taken from Autism Parenting Magazine -www.autismparentingmagazine.com