

Top Ways to Reduce an Autistic Child's Anxieties During the Coronavirus Pandemic

COVID-19 has created unprecedented impacts on many of our daily functions from attending school, going to the supermarket, and almost any activity that requires gatherings of large groups of people. Perhaps, none of these changes is more impactful than the fears and anxieties that have arisen among us all as we are uncertain of what the days ahead may bring. As our children with autism begin a remote learning model, the anxieties of how the world has changed in recent weeks may start to become more evident. In turn, kids may react with many of the worries and concerns that have been commonplace among us all.

In recognition of this, here are some thoughts to address these concerns:

1. Your child is watching the same television/social media you are

The media is reporting many alarming statistics, global effects, and other stark realities of COVID-19. Younger children with autism have no frame of reference to time, location, or circumstance for the situation at hand. That being noted, watching and listening to these resources may only serve to increase fear.

2. Avoid social media for all information

Social media during times of crisis can lead to a great deal of anger, fear, rumor, and misinformation. Try to keep up to date with information from reputable news sources.

3. "I don't know" is a suitable choice

In these ambiguous times, telling our autism children, "I don't know," is a choice that is both honest and accurate. We don't have many answers to the questions that our children may have about this unprecedented point of history. Being straightforward will help to continue to build trust in a confusing and rapidly changing circumstance.

4. This is a perfect period to reinforce lessons on hygiene

Of course, hygiene is pivotal at this time. Nevertheless, teaching these skills will also teach youth with autism some sense of “control,” and being able to do something in what feels like an uncontrollable situation.

5. Keep as much routine as feasible

Children with autism equate routine with safety. That being noted, major changes have arisen in routine. Keeping bedtimes, meal times, learning schedules, and other traditions within your home will help assure a degree of normalcy. Regular sleep and meal routines help keep all of us at our best and less susceptible to anxiety and health issues.

6. Mirror peace

You are the pilot of the airplane, and your child relies on you for direction and feelings of safety. If you mirror calm, your child will feel serene. Conversely, if you show fear, he/she will be frightened.

7. Only give your children the information they can handle and need

As parents of children with autism, we may aim to be supportive and share as much information to our children as we know. However, sharing only what our children request and can reasonably comprehend allows our children to process what they can handle at the time. When they ask other questions later, then those answers can be responded to during that timeframe.

8. Look for changes

If you notice significant changes in your special needs child’s behavior, such as excessive anxiety or regressive behavior(s), consider seeking outside professional assistance.

9. We can only be useful by handling our own mental and physical well-being

If you are not at 100 percent, you cannot be at 100 percent for anyone in your life. Take care of yourself mentally and physically first so that you can be at your best for those who need you most.

10. Emotions are high during this time

Emotions are running high with a level of unparalleled fear and anxiety regarding COVID-19. That being said, be careful to recognize that many times anger can arise quickly out of this degree of fear and anxiety. This may show up in several ways toward people and situations. Take time to recognize what may seem like misplaced anger could be these feelings lying just under the surface. Be patient with yourself and others (especially now).

11. Teachers are working their regular hours

Curriculum and expectations of special needs students have increased over the years. Many of us may feel ill-equipped to work with our children and lost as to what they are learning. The teacher websites should be updated and offer assistance.

12. Find alone time for you and your child if possible

In a world with so many short-term distractions, children with autism are quick to become bored. With being home for extended periods of time now, there may be a tendency for trying to avoid our children from being bored. Having your children determine the discipline of finding their own activities to decrease their boredom may be an extremely good life lesson.

Please take care of yourself and your loved ones as we work together as a community to help each other in this most challenging time.