

Supporting Children with Disabilities during COVID-19

Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities are facing exceptional challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. During these unique times it is important for parents of children and young people with disabilities to take a step back to think and reflect about this new 'normal' and what they can do within the resources they have to try to cope with these new challenges

These unprecedented times are intense and may be causing high levels of stress among parents and the family as a whole. The closure of schools, disruption to health services and the social distancing requirements; as well as the additional worry that many parents will have if their child is at risk due to secondary health conditions increase the pressure on families and carers.

Now more than ever it is important for parents of children and young people with disabilities to take a step back to think and reflect about this new 'normal' and what they can do within the resources they have to try to cope with these new challenges. The following strategies are helpful ways to get through these tough times.

Prioritise self care - It is critically important to **be kind to yourself**. If you have support at home, try to take some exercise, such as a short walk, as it is a powerful way to alleviate stress. If you can grab a few minutes, take some short breaks and try some meditation, a useful calming and grounding activity for ourselves and our family members. There are lots of nice apps and websites available with free mindfulness practices. Try <https://insighttimer.com> for some ideas.

Promote calm - **Creating a sense of structure**, routine and purpose to our day can help foster some calm. Try to plan a number of activities to do. Again, there are lots of resources online, for instance; the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure <https://ncse.ie/online-resources>.

Websites like Sparklebox www.sparklebox.com.uk and Twinkl www.twinkl.ie offer lots of ideas for activities. In addition, Lámh, a manual sign system used by children and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs in Ireland, are offering free and open access to Lámh signs online until the end of May, see www.Lamhsigns.org.

Visual supports for daily routines can be helpful in supporting routine, for example, the use of First/Then boards or visual schedules can help both you and your child to keep on track with some activity during the day.

Devices are part of our everyday lives. During these socially isolating days they are a fantastic way of staying connected to our friends and family. However, it is very important that we are mindful of overusing devices and to be sensible about how and when we use them. Extended periods on electronic devices can lead to over stimulation, frustration and dysregulation over time. Think about

the potential longer term fall out once life returns to normal for your child and your family. Try to set timers and schedule set amounts of device use into your routine.

Reassure your child, show love, encourage them to talk about their feelings. - Now is not the time to be overly worried about therapy. Show your child love and take this time to enjoy your child and to be with them. Checking in and asking our loved ones how they are feeling is helpful. There are some lovely visual ways of doing this, using things like emotional thermometers, emoji faces etc. There are many resources available online.

Communication - Try to be mindful of the language and the words you use. Using positive language can help reduce fear and stress, for example, 'staying at home will help keep you healthy' is less anxiety provoking than 'if we go out you could get sick'.

Social Stories are a lovely way to help improve understanding as to why things have changed so much for everyone. There are plenty available online which are specific to Covid-19. A good one to source is 'What is the coronavirus?' by Amanda McGuinness, from www.theautismeducator.ie

In summary, these times are bringing exceptional challenges to family life. The challenges that you have already faced through the experience of raising a child with a disability can be an asset to you. As described above, there are many ways of helping your family through these tough times. Above all though, try not to feel pressured to exactly replicate school and therapy services. Now is a good time to focus on being with your child, focus on wearing your 'parent hat' instead of your 'teacher' or 'therapist' hat and look after yourself and your family.

Please see link for list of HSE approved disability resources:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>

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Notes to Editor

*Text can be used in full or as part of a larger feature for print or online.

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