

Tips and Tricks for Setting up a Virtual Classroom for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Quick Tips:

- Have a consistent place and schedule for learning. Individuals with ASD do well with a routine. Try to make things the same each day. For example, always start with a favorite subject, use the same desk every day, and ask your student to have their supplies ready when they start their day.
- Use strategies that you know work at school. If your student uses visuals to stay on task in class, do that at home. For kids who wear headphones in the classroom, headphones at home may help them get into the routine of school at home.
- Use visual supports. Visual supports can be photographs, objects, written words, or lists. Visual supports help all children learn. Picture calendars, checklists, visual reminders (e.g., a picture that shows what they need for science, or a sign that says "Stay focused"), and video models of what they should do can all be helpful.
- Change the surroundings to meet their needs. Lights, noises, and textures can often be distracting to individuals with ASD. Consider things like dimming the lights or using a desk lamp instead of overhead lights, limiting background noise or using noise cancelling headphones, letting your student sit on a pillow or allowing them to lay on the floor while they work, etc.
- Take breaks. Some students need many short breaks and others need a few longer breaks. Make sure to plan them into the school day. Every student needs different kinds of breaks. Think about what kind of break your student needs: physical activity, a quiet time alone, or opportunity to interact with you..
- Do not get stuck on details. Adjusting to doing school at home with a parent or caregiver is hard for students and adults. Don't sweat the small stuff. It is okay if your student paces the room while practicing spelling, flaps their hands and rocks while watching the online instruction session, or does her/his math in crayon.
- Give the student some control. All children and teens, including those with ASD, like to have some choice in what they do and how they do it. Let your student decide what subject they start with, which paper and pencil they use, if they sit or stand while doing their work, and what they will finish before they get a break. Offering choices can be helpful for some students (e.g., "Do you want to have a sandwich or soup for lunch?; Do you want a blue or black pen today?"), while others may do better with more open questions or options (e.g., "What do you want for lunch?" or "What do you need to get to do this work?").
- Ask for help and take a break when you need one. Home school is hard. Really hard! It is fine to ask for help. If you are getting overwhelmed, take a break. Your example is so important to your student; this is your chance to show them how to handle frustration and let them know that everyone needs to ask for help sometimes.

2020 has been a year for the books. Parents and caregivers have had to become a coach, teacher, and therapist, all while juggling the other demands at home and managing the stress of doing all of this during a pandemic. And there is a whole other layer of pressure and needs when your child has special needs, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Below are some tips and tricks for not only surviving this time, but for setting up your child's virtual classroom for success.

What was working for your child previously when they were in-person?

- Don't reinvent the wheel.
- What helped your child have success in the classroom when they were attending school in-person?
- Are there parts of the in-person classroom environment or classroom accommodations that you can do in your child's virtual classroom (e.g., visual schedule, breaks, instructions clarified / repeated)?
- It is likely that with a little creativity and problem solving, many parts of your child's virtual classroom can include parts that work in their in-person classroom..

Visual Supports.

- Many individuals with ASD, younger and older, with or without language delays, do well with when using visual supports. Visual supports can be photographs, objects, written words, or lists.
- The following are the benefits of visual supports:
 - o Help children understand their daily schedule and what to expect.
 - o Serve as a permanent reminder children can reference over time after the language has faded (minimizing the need to rely on processing of language, short term memory, and organizational skills).
 - o Show a child what has been completed, what is left to complete, and what has to be completed prior to taking a break or earning a reinforcer.
- The Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder tool kit through Autism Speaks provides a step-by-step, easy-to-understand introduction to visual. The tool kit provides visual supports for parents to print, cut out and use, along with links to resources that provide more detailed information for those who want further information. Anyone can download the Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder Tool Kit for free at the following website: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/resources-programs/autism-treatment-network/tools-you-can-use/visual-supports>

Assess the Environment.

What may be challenging about the environment of the virtual classroom for your child and how can it be adjusted?

- Lighting
 - o Lighting of the room
 - Dim the lights
 - Use a lamp
 - Have your child work in a room with natural lighting / windows

- o Light from staring at a computer screen for long periods of the time
 - Blue light blocking screen protector
 - Breaks from the computer to complete other school activities
- Distractions
 - o Is there too much background noise or other things going on in the same area as your child's virtual classroom?
 - Can it be reduced or minimized?
 - o Is there too much clutter / materials on your child's desk or work space?
 - Can it be put away out of sight or better organized in some way?
 - o Are there things in the environment that keep catching your child's attention / eye (e.g., TV, preferred toy, sibling)?
 - Can it be removed from the area or placed out of sight?
 - Can your child's virtual classroom be moved to a different area or part of the house?

Breaks.

All children benefit from breaks throughout their school day. Ask yourself how long can your child typically pay attention and focus? Can you and your child's teachers build in breaks after this natural amount of sustained attention? This duration of sustained attention can be gradually increased over time.

- Breaks should be brief (around 5 minutes).
- What does your child need while on their break?
 - o Physical activity
 - Running
 - Jumping on the trampoline
 - Playing basketball
 - o Quiet
 - Playing quietly with their favorite toy
 - Coloring
 - Building with blocks
 - o Listening to music

Give choice and control when you can. Ask yourself:

- Can they choose what activity they start the day with (always better to start the day with a preferred activity)?
- Can they choose how many questions they complete before earning a break?
- Can they choose what they do on their break?
- Can they choose which pencil or paper they use?
- Can they choose what they eat for lunch?

It takes a village.

This is hard. This is really hard. Ask for help. Asking for help does not mean you are not capable; it means you are advocating for your child. We all need our village right now. If you and your child are struggling with virtual school (and who isn't?) reach out to your child's school team and let them know you need support. Let them know what is working and what is not. Brainstorm together. What extra supports can they offer? Decide as a team what is most important to focus on and prioritize for your child's education and what you can let go or not worry about as much.

And remember you are doing the best you can for your child right now given the circumstances. It is not going to be perfect. But it is going to be OK.

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