

Dear Midland Parents and Guardians,

**As we think of you, your children, and young adults during this challenging and unprecedented time, we have come across some articles from trusted sources that offer advice that we believe will be helpful to you. In turn, we highlight and share information that echo our own thoughts.**

**In an article entitled “What to Do When Your Child on the Autism Spectrum’s Routine is Disrupted by the Coronavirus” and posted on the Autism New Jersey website, Dr. Liz Matheis, a clinical and school psychologist and parent of children with special needs, suggests the following. We trust this information applies to children and young adults across various Developmental Disabilities.**

The change in the routine due to COVID-19 may upset or throw off your child. It’s a transition and transitions can be difficult and frightening for many kids on the spectrum — and you may be facing resistance from your child. So, how do you, as a parent, help your child with this upcoming change in routine and more time at home?

**I have a few ideas on how we are going to get through this, one day at a time:**

**1. Keep it the same... as it’s becoming different.**

In times like these, it’s very easy to change the routines, change your general rules about screen time, bedtime, wake time, snacks or whatever else. I urge you to maintain a similar schedule from day-to-day. Set a wake-up time, a time for lunch (perhaps the same as your child’s school schedule), screen time and bedtime. If you can, try to mimic your child’s school schedule by having periods of time during which certain activities will take place.

It's very easy for our children to be entertained by an iPad, television or computer, but stick to time limits. Create a visual schedule with times or durations for each activity and follow it throughout the day. Build downtime for you as well as your child so you aren't overwhelmed either.

With that said, stick to your new or revised routine so that your child can rely on the familiar amidst the unfamiliar. Making a change to your routine takes another element of your child's life and makes it even rockier. Don't feel bad and don't offer too many exceptions to the rules or special treats to make this time easier for your child. That can make this situation confusing and anxiety-provoking.

## **2. Keep it positive.**

As you are staying open to your child's difficulty with this change in schedule, try to embrace the extra time you have with your child and try to do something fun together. It's very easy to feel overwhelmed for having to be the parent, the teacher and the therapist right now. Use this time to bake together, play a board game and prepare meals together. If you can, try to make the most of this time that we do have in our homes with our families. It's truly unusual and there are two ways to make sense of this — either it's not good or it can be OK (maybe even fun!).

## **3. Keep anxiety out of the mix.**

If your child is [sensing your anxiety](#) about the change in routine and about the thoughts you are having about the coronavirus, it's time to take some deep breaths, incorporate yoga, meditation or walks into your day to help you manage your anxiety.

Turn off the news and avoid discussing the latest numbers of people diagnosed, the shortage of disinfecting products or anything else in front of your children. If your child asks questions, answer just the question and don't

expand. Don't offer statistics, numbers and don't share your fears. A little bit of a response to the question may be enough to satisfy your child.

As humans, we are creatures of habit. Many of us thrive on routine and familiarity and dread a change. I am sending all parents everywhere good health vibes, prayers and patience while we figure out our new normal over the next few weeks!

**Michael C. Selbst, Ph.D., BCBA-D, a psychologist, behavior analyst and executive director of Behavior Therapy Associates in Somerset, New Jersey, offers the following in an article entitled "Coping with the Stress of the Global Challenges of Coronavirus (COVID-19)". Dr. Selbst's advice below is particularly relevant for the challenge you face every day as parents of children with special needs. It is important that you take care of your selves as well.**

During this very difficult time, it is easy to notice an increased level of stress and anxiety. Noticing and managing one's stress are important for self-care and living life more fully. First, it is important to recognize that stress is a part of life, and that during significant global events like we are experiencing, a significant increase in stress seems to become the "new normal." Attempts to try to eliminate such stress often result in even greater stress, leading to anxiety. Then, we get anxious about getting anxious. This is a disheartening loop from which to escape.

We eventually realize that our solutions to *eliminate* stress (excessive worry, complaining, getting angry) now become another *problem to solve*. This can exacerbate the very beast we are trying to tame in the first place.

Instead of focusing on self-care, we incorrectly focus on trying to keep digging and digging within the hole we have found ourselves, thinking somehow we will eventually get out of the hole. We need to stop "struggling" with the stress and take active steps to do something different, something aligned with who and what we care about. This includes steps to care for yourself.

"Taking care of yourself doesn't mean me first, it means me too" (L.R. Knost). In order to practice self-care, there needs to be present moment awareness of stress and fatigue levels, as well as personal accountability that previous efforts have not worked effectively. Self-care practices may include mindful eating, exercising, connecting with others in your family, maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, planning and committing time for meaningful leisure activities, and increasing vitality. This can be more challenging during these times of social distancing. Yet, that becomes just another thought to notice. That is, "My mind is telling me it's difficult to take time for myself during these tough times."

It is important to create a Self-Care Plan to commit time to your physical, social, emotional, and professional well-being. This includes setting aside specific time to exercise, connect with others (in the house, via phone, text, social media, or video call), relax, consult with others related to work issues, etc. It is critical to schedule these self-care events and to commit to them as if they were the most important "appointment" you have scheduled that day. You may notice "stinking thinking" that shows up like "I want to work out *but* I'm so tired and stressed." *Replace this with* "I want to work out even though I feel tired" and then GO and work out.

Many people find that keeping a Thought Diary / Journal is helpful. This may include writing down one's thoughts and feelings about the day. It is important to notice and accept your thoughts and feelings for what they are, rather than question, challenge, or try to change them or minimize them. You might tell yourself, "I'm noticing I'm having the thought that...", or "Thanks mind for telling me." This changes the relationship you have with your thoughts and feelings, allowing you to "lead" your mind where *you* want to go (toward self-care), instead of allowing your mind to take you where it wants to go.

Most importantly, take time for yourself. You deserve it and you will be in a much healthier position to help and care for others. Please be healthy, safe, and kind to yourself and those around you.

## **Finally, Comfortzonecamp.org offers the following:**

We are all experiencing disruption in our daily lives. This is uncharted territory for us, but is an extra confusing and even worrisome time for our kids. Here are some practical tips to help navigate this time:

- Understand that kids are experiencing “life grief.” They are “grieving” the disruption of their daily lives – sports seasons, playdates, concerts, etc. cancelled. Expect emotions like sadness, anger and confusion. Life as they know it has changed and there is not a clear end in sight.
- Validate whatever your kids are thinking or feeling is okay.
- Remain calm and reassuring: Kids will take their lead from you.
- Be honest and talk in age (developmentally) appropriate language.
- Monitor and limit TV and social media.
- Make this an opportunity to do some family activities you wouldn't do otherwise—plant a garden, have game nights, bake, do some DIY projects, start a book club, etc.
- Look for the something good from something bad and point out those moments

**We hope this information is indeed helpful. As always, please feel free to contact either of us with any questions or concerns.**

**With very best regards,**

**Tom Enos, School Psychologist  
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