



# INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

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## Strategies to help children with Autism during lockdown in the times of COVID-19

In our previous post on “Autism awareness in the times of COVID-19”, we talked about an imaginary 7 years old boy Amit who had Autism with limited speech (single words). We discussed how Amit was struggling to cope with the sudden lockdown that has been imposed following the COVID-19 epidemic. Let’s now focus on strategies that parents can use to help Amit or any similar boy with Autism in the current situation. We will keep using Amit’s name in this document to refer to this imaginary boy.

- 1. Explain what is happening:** The best way to help kids with Autism in this situation is to first understand what they might be experiencing during these difficult times.
- 2. Social stories to explain the current situation:** The first and perhaps one of the most important step is to describe the current situation in the form of social stories to your child. A social story aims to be simple and easily understood. It is best told visually as children with Autism understand visuals better generally. The language used should be simple and tailored to the child. So, the best stories are those made by parents and therapists working with the child. Check this link by “Sampark Foundation” for a readymade social story in a video format explaining the current COVID-19 pandemic.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKn2FGcaawU>
- 3. Make use of this time:** While it is true that this lockdown is painful, it is also an opportunity for parents to spend a lot of time with their child. Just spending more quality time with children might lead to decrease in behavior issues.
- 4. Structured routine:** Restructure the routine of the child as per the available time and resources. As with the social stories, make it a Visual routine. Visual depiction helps the child better understand it. The visual routine should also show the date and day in a way that the child can comprehend.

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5. **Choosing activities:** This doesn't have to be a list of fancy activities. Instead we advise to choose routine household activities, like watering the plants, dough kneading, helping in food preparation etc. Try and include activities based on the child's interests. Screen time should be consistent although a little bit of extra allowance for the current times is probably OK. If using mobile phones, it is always better to use apps that have some educational value. Creative activities like writing, sketching, colouring are preferred. Board games that can involve a number of family members should always be preferred to mobile phone based games. Keep the sleep and meal times regulated and predictable as we know that predictability can avoid tantrums in a lot of children with Autism.
6. **An example of a routine of home-based activities** followed by a family for Amit, their 7 years boy with Autism: They mostly follow a consistent routine which is displayed visually. Amit is given some choices again in a visual format. His family helped him make play dough with dough and salt on the first day of lockdown as he loves play dough. He plays with play dough first thing in the morning everyday. Following that, he is engaged in gardening. Gardening activities alternate between watering the plants and ploughing the sand and mud of plants. This is followed by a special 1:1 time with his mother when she makes him pluck leaves of palak (spinach), methi (fenugreek), dhaniya (coriander) and peel potatoes. This activity caters to his sensory need of having to touch different textures. Thereafter, he plays with his 12 years old sister and is given a choice between blocks, puzzles and ludo. He mostly chooses blocks. After lunch, when he wants some time alone, he plays on his own in his tent-house, which his father has improvised by putting a bedsheet over their table. He sometimes chooses to imitate animal sounds while in his tent. Late afternoons and evenings are busy with a lot of activities. He is first given a choice between dancing with his sister and playing treasure hunt. He always chooses dancing as it is one of his favourite activities. Following this, he is again given a choice between hopping and trampoline and he mostly chooses to jump on his trampoline. There is an optional activity that involves helping his mother in drying and folding the washed clothes. Amit has an option to say 'NO' to any activity when he is not

in the mood. He is also given liberal praise for engaging in activities. Amit's parents make it a point that he always helps in cleaning the place after finishing any activity.

7. **Clear simple instructions:** When talking to your child, keep the instructions clear, simple and short. Don't use sarcasm or sentences with double meaning. Check understanding frequently. Never ask questions which your child can't answer e.g., questions like "Will you keep quiet?" or "Will you sit down?" are totally not acceptable! You should just say, "Please keep quiet/talk quietly" or "Please sit down". Also try and always frame your instruction positively. So when you want your child to stop running, don't say "Stop running". Instead tell your child what to do e.g., "Please walk slowly" or "Please stop".
8. **Descriptive commentary or Parallel talk** is a wonderful way through which parents can talk to their child about what the child might be thinking, observing or experiencing. Comment on **what** your child is doing. So if your child is playing with toys, you may describe what he is doing by saying something like, "Amit is playing with the red car and the yellow truck". You may further describe **how** he is playing e.g., "Amit is working so hard on that puzzle and thinking about where that piece will go." Describe the **emotions** that he might experience during the lockdown e.g., "Amit is angry. Everything is shut. No school, no park....." OR "Amit is happy at home playing with Mumma".
9. **Sensory issues:** Don't panic if the sensory issues are exaggerated. Hearing day-in and day-out about *corona virus* and *pandemic* is sure to raise our anxieties in many ways and imbibing the anxiety in the environment, the children might have increase in their hypersensitivities. Apart from specifically adjusting the home environment to avoid sensory triggers, a calm and consistent approach from parents also helps in containing the sensory problems.
10. **It's OK to have an occasional bad day!** We all at times feel overwhelmed and tired, given the stress levels due to the pandemic. And that will happen with parents who have children with autism. Recently, Amit's mother told us that one day she scolded him badly when she was cleaning the house and Amit was dirtying the floor with his water colours. However, Amit's father stepped in and helped her

handle the situation. He first redirected Amit to another activity and then helped mother clean up. This is an extremely important message for everyone in the family including fathers, elder siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents to step in.

11. **Have hope!** While the usual life is under lockdown, hopes are still free. Let us turn our hopes into reality by using this time creatively to discover new potentials of our children.

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