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## Distance Learning for Students on the Autism Spectrum: Just Keep Swimming



| *By Barbara Boroson*

**T**his spring, life as we knew it was whisked away as abruptly as bottles of hand sanitizer from drugstore shelves, leaving us suspended in a state of frantic disorientation.

As we all struggle to course-correct in these uncharted waters, our students on the autism spectrum are especially off-balance. They tend to be destabilized by unexpected

change and deviations from routine. And now, not only are their comfortable routines toppled, but the rules that they cling to in order to feel safe and calm have been tossed aside. Self-constructed rules like *The school day starts with a bus ride; without a bus ride, school cannot start*, or *Teachers teach at school; not at home*, can make remote learning a nonstarter for these students.

Even as you work to adapt to virtual engagement platforms yourself, you'll also need to accommodate the challenges of your students on the spectrum—just as you do in the actual classroom.

Many students on the spectrum depend on a visual schedule at school to help them know what's next. In context of the Coronavirus, *everyone* is anxious about what's next—and *no one* knows the answer. As hard as that is for us to tolerate, the unknown can be unbearable and preoccupying for students on the spectrum. Creating structure for anything we can allows us to retain some locus of control amid the chaos. Even students on the spectrum who didn't need visual schedules at school may need them now.

Here are some simple but important suggestions for structuring the days in ways that will ease anxiety and maximize learning time. These will be helpful for all of your students, but may be game-changers for those on the spectrum:

- Anxiety is a barrier to learning; a clear schedule helps break down that barrier. Take a little time, ideally at the beginning of each week (or each day, if that's how you're rolling), to establish a schedule and walk through it with your students.
- Limit active learning periods to short chunks to enhance opportunities for success.
- Build in teacher-led, small-group, break-out sessions for re-teaching and review in order to boost comprehension and ensure assimilation.
- Create time in the schedule to guide students about where and how to organize their digital assignments, completed work, and online resources.
- Schedule daily, individualized, social-emotional checkpoints whenever possible so that you can differentiate meaningful support as needed.

Some students on the autism spectrum will be more engaged with online learning than they are with classroom learning, simply because online learning involves the computer which is often a source of relative comfort and competence for these students. But many

will have difficulty with the demands of remote auditory processing, independent reading, transcribing from the computer, and maintaining attention and visual focus on the screen. Moreover, many will be distracted by the fundamental incongruity of trying to learn academic content on a screen that usually hosts Moana, Mario, and Minecraft, or spending the school day in a room that also contains a cabinet full of chips and cookies. School no longer feels like school, and home doesn't exactly feel like home anymore, either.

Let the familiar strategies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) be your life raft in supporting engagement and productivity during remote learning periods:

- Present new information in varied ways (e.g., videos, podcasts, cartoons, songs) to maximize engagement and comprehension.
- Encourage varied and creative means for students to demonstrate their effort and their understanding. Accept drawings, acrostics, home-made movies, PowerPoints, poems, raps, etc.
- Provide verbal prompts to help students get started and visual or verbal cues to help them stay focused.
- Present examples of completed projects to help them see where they are headed.
- Arrange differentiated ways for students to ask for help, like "raising their hand" in the chat box or pulling on their ear in the gallery view.

Even with these simple adaptations, the pervasive anxiety of this period creates a perfect storm, not only for you and your students on the autism spectrum, but also for their families. The students' baseline anxiety is heightened, which often causes them to react by melting down, acting out, or withdrawing. Those reactions, in turn, add enormous stress to their families who were already struggling to stay afloat with the daily strain of autism, and are now drowning under the demands of managing their own employment and supporting their children's distance education, along with social isolation, cabin fever, acute health risk, and financial insecurity.

To a varying extent, states are acknowledging the distinct challenges of remote learning for students who have disabilities by accepting teachers' "good faith" efforts to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and to follow the guidance of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). A fact sheet from the US Department of Education emphasizes

that “federal disability law allows for flexibility in determining how to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The determination of how FAPE is to be provided may need to be different in this time of unprecedented national emergency.”

So, in the name of flexibility, and in the interest of preserving your own well-being, along with that of your students and their storm-tossed families, throw parents and guardians a line. Let them know that you are open to accepting alternate versions of assignments, and that you understand that treading water may be all they can manage right now. To that end, here is a list of highly motivating, subliminal, “home” learning activities that happen to align with common IEP goals and curricular skills.

## FaceTime

Encourage students to interview relatives or friends, using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices if needed. Assign a specific number of reciprocal exchanges and related responses. Students can create a timeline of important events in their friends or relatives’ lives in the context of major national or global events, or a map that documents where they have lived or travelled. Skills supported include:

- *Academic:* inquiry learning, information analysis, historical research, civic engagement, geography, map sense.
- *Interpersonal:* listening, maintaining conversation, demonstrating interest.
- *Speech & language:* articulation, pragmatics, semantics.
- *Vocational:* career exploration.

## Cooking

When parents or guardians are available, students can help with cooking or take on special cooking projects. They can experiment with food combinations and unfamiliar tastes and textures. Students can set up a restaurant for the family by planning a nutritionally balanced meal, preparing a menu, taking reservations, decorating the space, setting and clearing the table, greeting guests, serving, cleaning up. Skills supported include:

- *Academic*: reading, writing, number sense and calculation, measurement, fractions, chemistry.
- *Interpersonal*: perspective-taking, attending to the needs of others.
- *Occupational Therapy (OT)*: fine-motor coordination, visual-motor integration, motor planning, sensory exploration.
- *Independent Living and ADL*: nutrition, hygiene, food preparation.
- *Vocational*: food preparation, food service, hospitality.

## **Movies**

Special educator Leigh Wilson suggested in a recent webinar that kids create a movie theater at home. They can make tickets, “sell” tickets, count money, make change, prepare popcorn and drinks, create a movie poster, greet guests as they arrive, have a family discussion about the movie, compare it to the book, write a review or a preferred ending. Skills supported include:

- *Academic*: money sense and calculation, reading, writing, comparing and contrasting, critical analysis.
- *Interpersonal*: attending to the needs and interests of others, respecting the opinions of others, flexible thinking.
- *OT*: fine-motor coordination and motor planning
- *Independent Living and ADL*: use of money, food preparation, hygiene
- *Vocational*: publicity, event planning, retail, food preparation, food service, hospitality

## **Art**

Most art activities (like finger painting, playdoh, clay, drawing, coloring, painting, cutting, pasting, taping, and stapling) support goals including:

- *OT*: visual-motor integration, fine-motor and bilateral coordination, sensory desensitization, proprioception, spatial reasoning.

Art-related games like Pictionary and Telestrations support those same *OT* skills, along with these:

- *Academic*: use of context clues, observation, representation, inference, problem solving, visualization, vocabulary.
- *Interpersonal*: taking turns, flexible thinking, taking the perspective of others.

## Physical Activity

Socially distanced athletic activities, like hopscotch, bike riding, and shooting hoops, and active family games like Twister, Hulabaloo, Wii Sports, and Xbox Sports support skills that can include:

- *Academic*: Left versus right, color sense, number sense, following instructions, working memory.
- *Interpersonal*: teamwork, flexibility, turn-taking, sportsmanship.
- *OT and Physical Therapy (PT)*: gross-motor and bilateral coordination, motor planning, spatial reasoning, flexibility, vestibulation, and proprioception.

## Classic Games

Most board games are great for supporting skills that include:

- *Academic*: counting, planning, prediction, attention span.
- *Interpersonal*: rule-following, waiting, turn-taking, and flexibility.
- *OT*: fine-motor coordination and visual-motor integration.

**In addition, many games offer further benefits:**

- CandyLand, Trouble, Sorry, and Backgammon encourage *academic* skills like counting and 1:1 correspondence.
- Jenga and Operation boost *academic* skills like precision and focus.

- Chess and Rush Hour reinforce *academic* skills such as analytical thinking, problem solving, sequencing, visualization, pattern detection, and geometry.
- Clue, Battleship, Guess Who, and 20 Questions exercise *academic* muscles such as working memory, logic, problem solving, and deductive reasoning.
- Eye Spy requires *academic* skills including visual scanning and sorting, as well as the *interpersonal* skill of taking the perspective of others.
- Card games like Uno and Blink promote *academic* skills like sorting and matching.
- Bingo requires *academic* skills such as attentive listening, scanning, and geometry skills.
- Jigsaw puzzles support *academic* skills including sorting, shape recognition, memory, concentration, and persistence; *interpersonal* skills like collaboration and patience, and *OT* skills like scanning and spatial reasoning.

## Video Games

Almost all video games reinforce *OT* skills like visual-motor integration, fine-motor and bilateral coordination, scanning, and spatial reasoning. If played cooperatively, they also support *interpersonal* skills such as collaboration, turn-taking, waiting, and flexibility. In addition:

- Minecraft bolsters *academic* skills like planning and problem-solving; *social-emotional* skills like decision-making and self-determination; and *interpersonal* skills like collaboration and flexible thinking.
- Portal requires *academic* skills including logic, problem solving, physics, math, science; and *interpersonal* skills like collaboration, flexibility
- Where on Google Earth is Carmen Sandiego? supports *academic* skills including global geography, historic events, cultural diversity, problem-solving, and deductive reasoning; and *social-emotional* skills like decision-making and self-determination.
- Little Big Planet reinforces *academic* skills including critical thinking, math skills, logic, design, and problem solving.
- Kerbal Space Program supports *academic* STEM skills—especially physics, as well as geometry, the solar system, space exploration, rocketry, drones, design.

In typical circumstances, these ideas would not be our go-to strategies. But in these tumultuous times, we do what we can to stay afloat. Be gentle with your students. Be gentle with their parents and guardians. Be gentle with yourself. Let parents and guardians know that you'll accept some of these engaging, skill-building activities in lieu of traditional assignments, and that you will ensure that their children are learning from them.

I often say that there is no such thing as a typical day for an atypical child. Right now, there is no such thing as a typical day for anyone. Today, all we can do is just keep swimming.

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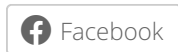
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**Barbara Boroson, LMSW**, is the author of *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom: How to Reach and Teach Students with ASD* (2016) and the forthcoming book, *Decoding Autism and Leading the Way to Successful Inclusion* (2020). Barbara has worked in autism education for 25 years in clinical, administrative, and advisory capacities, and speaks at conferences and school districts nationwide. She lives with her husband and their two children, one of whom is on the autism spectrum. You can contact Barbara at [www.barbaraboroson.com](http://www.barbaraboroson.com).



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