Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
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Supporting Children with ASD and/or Learning Disability in Coping with COVID-19 Isolation

The coming weeks and months will be a difficult time for families. The schools are closed, and we have been advised to self-isolate and socially distance from our friends and family. Our normal routines have changed and everything feels a little unpredictable.

We have created this information pack to support parents of children with an ASD or LD during this time – hopefully some of the strategies will be useful to make things a bit more manageable.

CONTENTS

A. Structure and Routine
B. Sensory Regulation Activities
C. Managing Behaviour
D. Maintaining a Good Sleep Routine
E. Self-Care

This booklet has been adapted by the SLT, OT and Psychology multidisciplinary team working in the Autism Intervention Service, BHSCT. We would like to thank Dr Rebecca Collins and her colleagues at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board for their consent to use their document for guidance.

A. Why is structure and routine important?

Children and young people with ASD and/or learning difficulties cope best within a predictable environment and positive routine. When things **change** or when there is **uncertainty**, this can lead to **anxiety** or **behaviours that may challenge.** It is important that we try to provide predictability where possible to reduce anxiety and increase participation in our daily lives. The following strategies can help you do that;

1. Provide accurate and easy to understand information about COVID-19

Social stories are a simple tool that we can use to describe a particular situation, event or activity. They can help us to explain what to expect and why.

https://littlepuddins.ie/coronavirus-social-story/

http://www.autismni.org/why-do-i-have-to-stay-at-home.html

2. Build structure into your daily routine

We all thrive when we have a routine. Autistic children/young people require routine and predictability to their day, even more.

Doing activities at the same time and in the same routine, can be a helpful way to ease anxiety, and improve cooperation. Doing washing and dressing routines, meals, and sleep routines in the same way, at the same time, is very comforting and removes stress.

3. Use visual strategies

Visual strategies provide concrete communication that is easier to understand than spoken words. They can reduce anxiety by increasing predictability.

Objects are the most easiest understood visual cue. Objects provide multisensory information (about touch, feel, smell, weight, colour, and movement of the object). Therefore, objects give the child the most chance of understanding the object, and its relationship to the next activity. Objects can be used for those with limited language, and they are also most helpful for a child or young person who is distressed, and unable to process language.

How to use an object to give information:

- Show the object (e.g. coat)
- Let the child/young person touch and explore the object
- Allow processing time
- Say the words related to the activity (e.g. “time to go out”)
- Allow processing time
- Move in the direction of the next activity/area

Visual schedules

A visual schedule is a tool to show a person where they have to be and when something is happening. A visual schedule can be used to help prepare for change. A schedule also helps with time management.

Autistic people typically enjoy repetitive activities or become absorbed in their passions and interests; there are many positives about this. However, there may be times when you need to help your child/young person structure their day to ensure they can do other activities, such as personal care activities, and/or household chores. A schedule is a useful strategy to build a healthy routine.

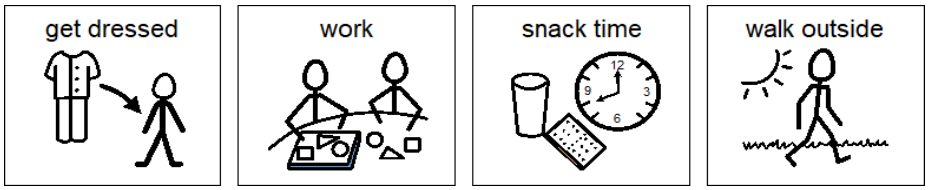
Schedules come in a variety of forms: first/then charts, written lists, school timetables, diaries, calendars and a personal organiser on a mobile phone.

Visual supports work best when they are portable, durable, personalised and consistent. Here is some extra information about schedules.

https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visualsupports.aspx

- **Photo schedule** is helpful for children or young people who need to see a real life representation of the activity. ‘First and Then’ or ‘Now and Next’ schedules are helpful if the person can only deal with knowing information relating to the next few minutes.

- **Line drawing/symbol schedules** include drawn images or Boardmaker images. You can add pictures to show the morning routine. You can then make an afternoon schedule. Later, you can make an evening routine.



- **Written schedule** is a written list. You can even make a written schedule in a text message to your young person, or in an email, or on a white board in the kitchen, bathroom and/or bedroom.

- **Schedule apps** are available on the iPad or any smart phone.

- **Weekly charts** can be useful for children and young people who need to know the detail ahead of time. Some people only want to know what they are doing for the day, or for just parts of the day at a time.

Mini schedules for personal care activities: think about making a min-schedule or written list to help your child/young person keep on task with showering, hygiene, dressing. List out the separate steps and leave the list. Having sight of the list can be a support to help keep on task.

Use Alarms: Consider whether setting alarms throughout the day would help you as a parent or carer to keep on schedule. Perhaps, the young person would benefit from setting alarms on their phone to remind them of important tasks.

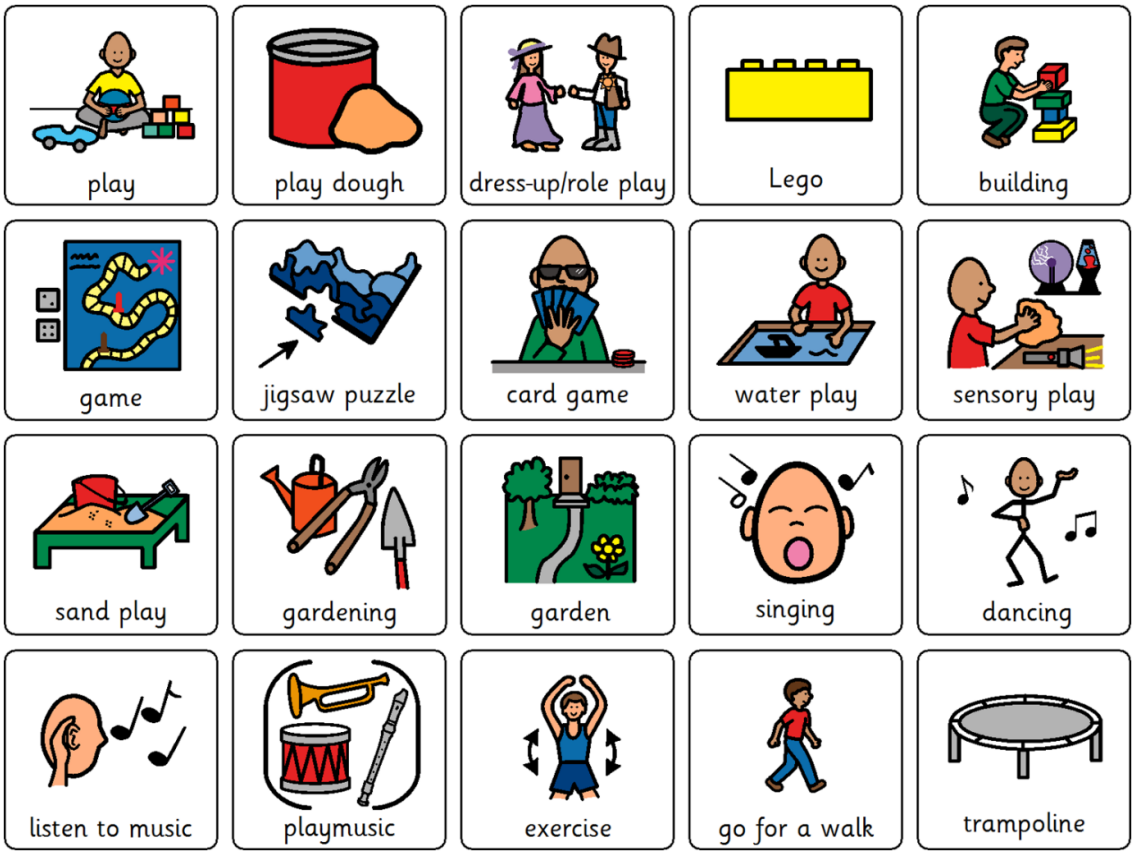
For children and young people with language difficulties, use different songs to mark different points in the day. Make up your own songs for the morning routine, e.g. a good morning song. Make up a bath time song, a going out song, and a time to go home song. Be creative and put words to familiar tunes.

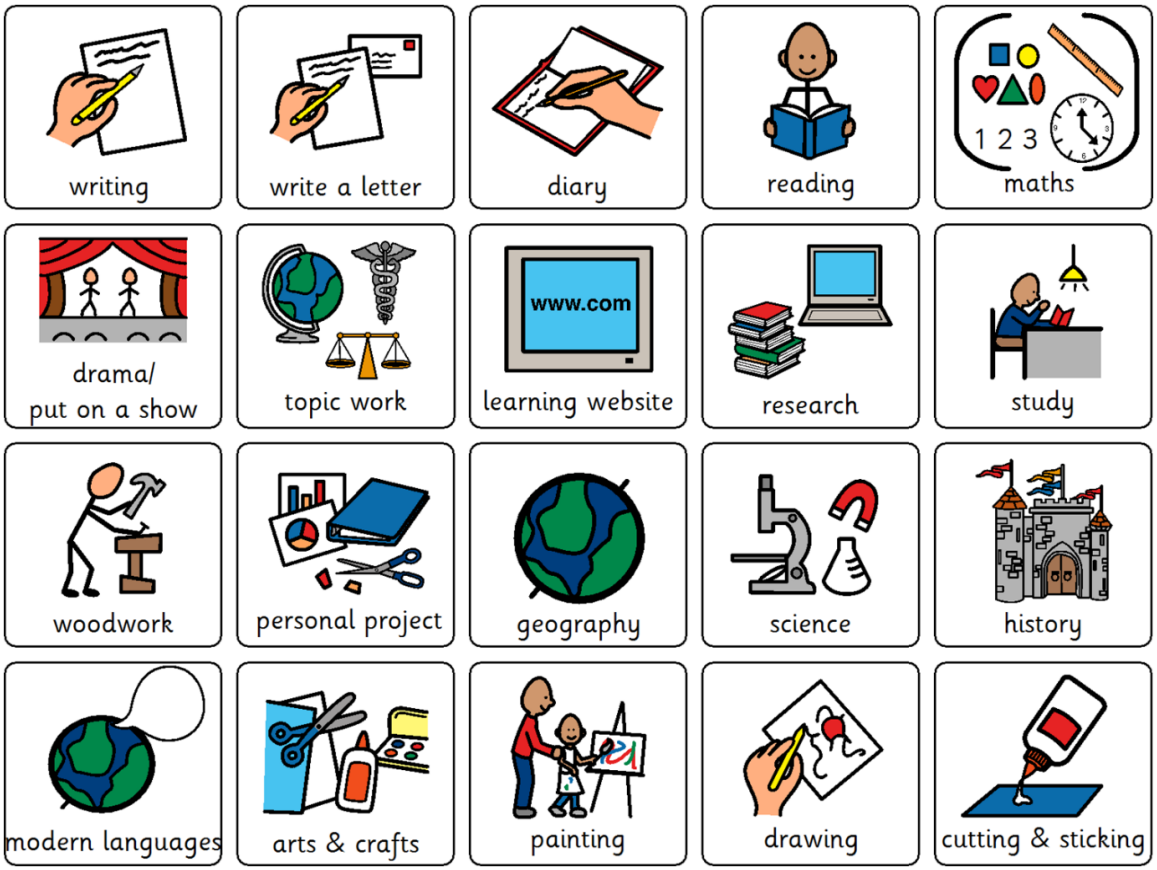
Resources:

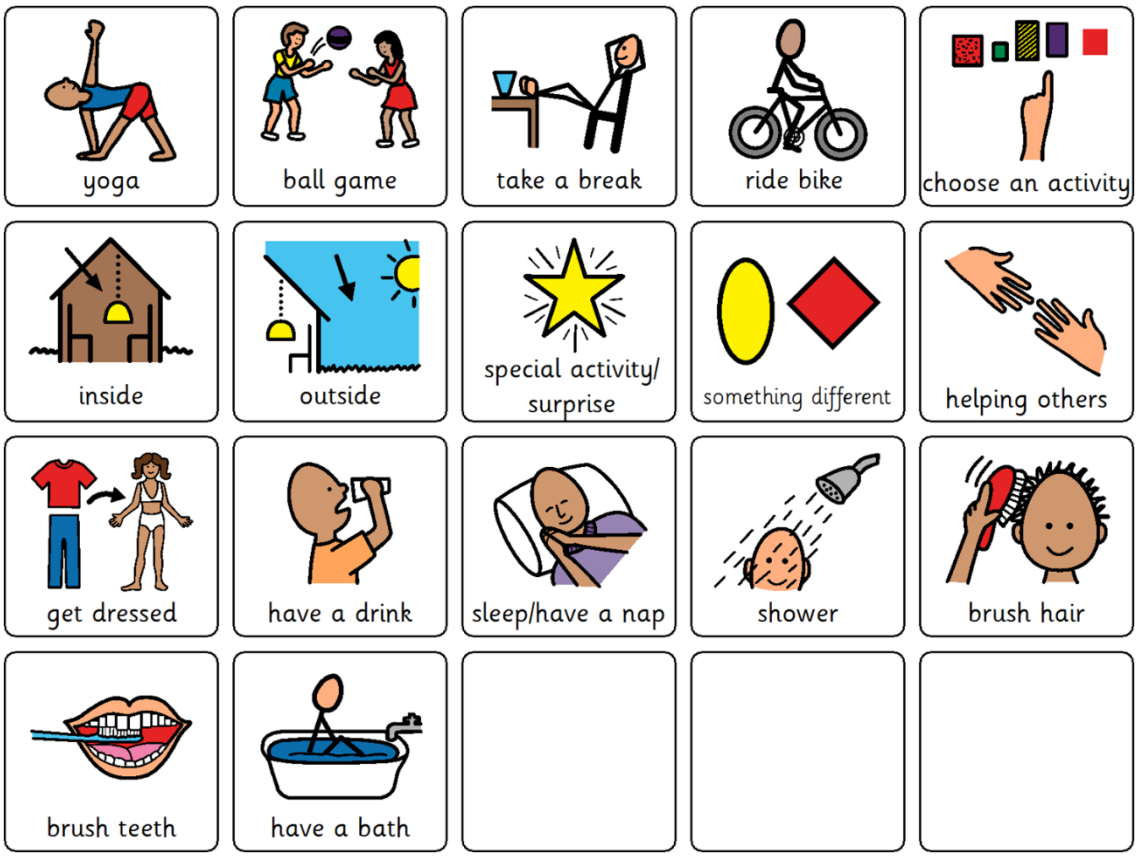
You can download pictures from websites such as http://www.do2learn.com/picturecards/printcards/ to make schedules or, you can use your own photos or pictures.

We have provided some visual resources on the following pages that you may find helpful:

snack time
lunchtime
dinner time
baking
cooking
relax
phone time
tablet time
speak to family & friends online
email
computer time
video game
Internet
take photographs
watch TV
wash hands
cleaning
tidying
care for pets
dishes


play
play dough
dress-up/role play
Lego
building
game
jigsaw puzzle
card game
water play
sensory play
sand play
gardening
garden
singing
dancing
listen to music
playmusic
exercise
go for a walk
trampoline


writing
write a letter
diary
reading
1 2 3
maths
drama/
put on a show
topic work
www.com
learning website
research
study
woodwork
personal project
geography
science
history
modern languages
arts & crafts
painting
drawing
cutting & sticking

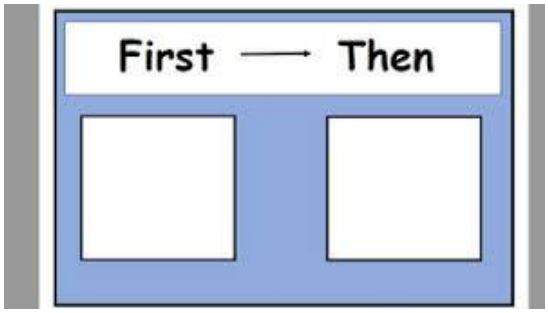

yoga
ball game
take a break
ride bike
choose an activity
inside
outside
special activity/
surprise
something different
helping others
get dressed
have a drink
sleep/have a nap
shower
brush hair
brush teeth
have a bath

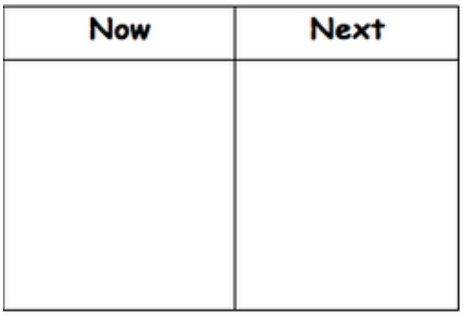
4. Transitioning between tasks

Some children/young people have particular difficulty moving from one activity to the next, even when what is coming next is something they like to do. Some have difficulty when asked to stop doing something they enjoy. Here are some ideas to help with transitions:

- Ensure that the child always knows what will be coming up next (e.g. "Watch TV, then bath.") It is helpful to show this visually and then give a simple verbal instruction. Try to keep your language the same each time.

- **'First & Then'** **<u>or</u>** **'Now & Next'**





- **Counting down from 5**

Use countdowns or timers to helps prepare for stopping, and allows processing time.

Count down from 5 using your fingers or you can use a **countdown strip**

- **Timers**

Using the Time Timer shown below (also available in an app) set the timer to show the desired amount of time.

Explain that the red section is the amount of time left to complete the activity.

Show how the red area gets smaller as time runs out.

Explain that when it is gone, time has run out, and it is time for a new task.

5. Provide structure during unstructured times

Some people with ASD might struggle to occupy their free time, or make choices. Showing choices on a board using photos/pictures or a written list removes stress, and makes it clear what is available and what is not available.

Very young children and young people who have learning difficulties might need you to provide additional play ideas to help structure their free time. Here are some sensory-based play ideas that can be used to fill free time. Offer one activity at a time:

Structured play resources: https://www.shoeboxtasks.com/

6. Provide visual communication strategies to help communicate about emotions

Managing emotions can be difficult for us all at times of stress. For those with communication difficulties, communicating and managing emotions is even more difficult. The child/young person may demonstrate behaviours of concern when unable to express their worries, fear or confusion.

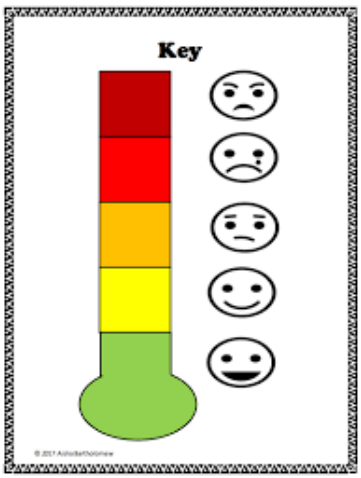
There are a number of visual communication strategies available. These are best introduced when your child is calm and relaxed rather than waiting until they are anxious or upset. Sometimes, you need to put up an emotions chart and use it yourself as a model of its use. You may like to try one of the below strategies:

- **The Incredible 5 point scale** https://www.5pointscale.com/

On a scale of 1 to 5, Number 1 represents the ideal behaviour or emotion (e.g. OK, relaxed, content) and number 5 represents the most heightened or most intense feeling. You can use this basic method to talk about how your child is feeling about something, or you can talk about how you are feeling about something e.g. “Today I was really annoyed because someone broke my phone. I felt about a 3. So, I had to take myself for a walk and listen to music. I’m feeling about a 2 now.”

	This Looks Like ...	I Can Do ...
5		
4		
3		
2		
1		

- **An emotions thermometer** is another way to indicate increasing anger, anxiety or other negative or powerful emotions.

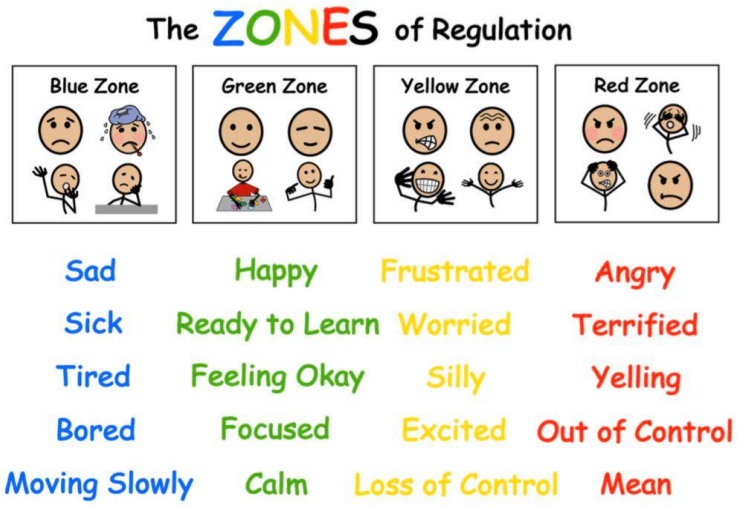


Some more information is available here:

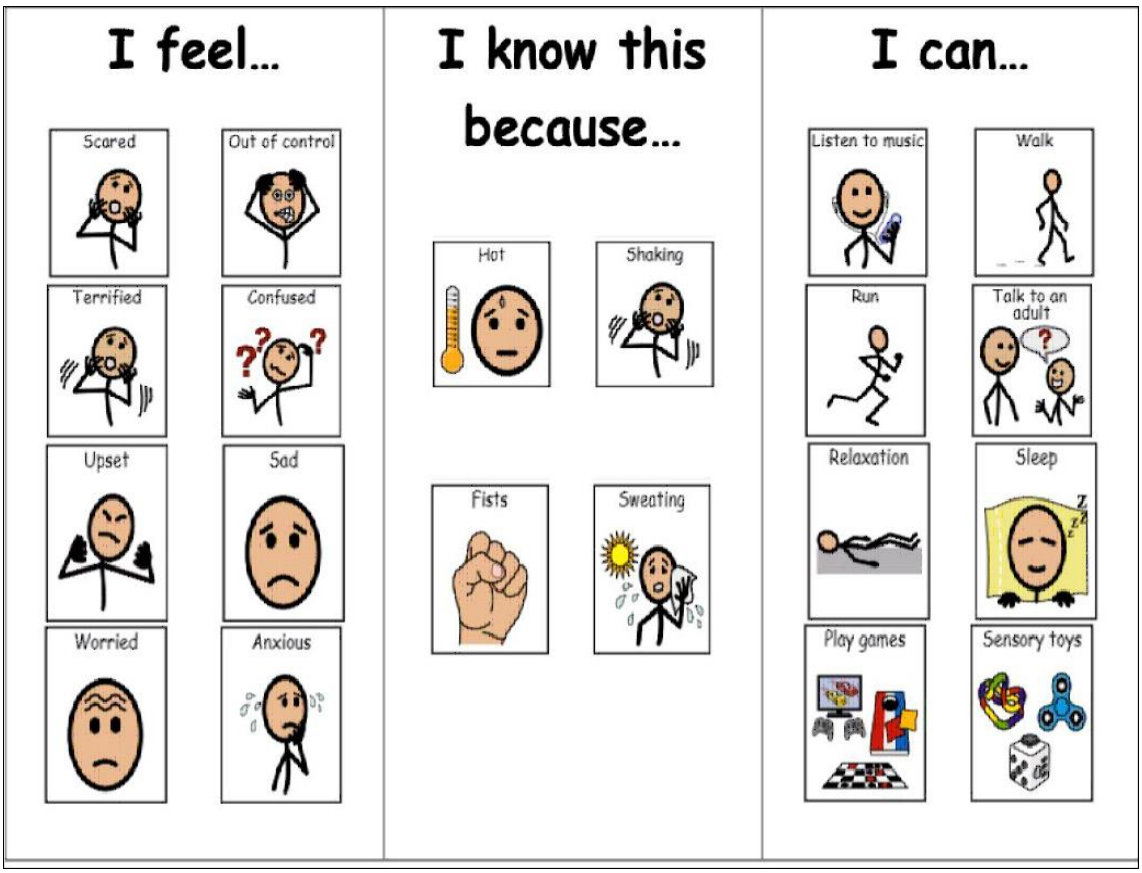
http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos/#emotions-thermometer

- **Zones of Regulation® (http://www.zonesofregulation.com)**

We all cope best when we feel safe and secure, and when our levels of alertness are well balanced. Zones of regulation can help children identify, and use safe techniques to gain self-control and emotional regulation. You could display this chart below showing the different coloured zones. You can refer to it in relation to how you are feeling. You can encourage your young person to indicate which zone they are in.



Below is another helpful chart that your child/young person can use to identify their feelings and then find solutions.



More resources:

https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/teenage-issues-and-strategies/emotional-wellbeing/emotional-regulation/

http://autismni.org/anxiety-resource-pack.html

http://www.autismni.org/free-apps-for-children---self-care-and-emotional-well-being.html

https://teencalm.com/resources/

7. Dealing with the Unexpected

Sometimes, things change or happen unexpectedly. It is important to be practical and use what you have available. Keep calm, and give yourself and your child/young person to come to terms with the change.

You don't need to have fancy, laminated schedules. Sometimes, the simple things are the best, and are just as effective.

- An object schedule: objects are understood by all so if you don't have the pictures, grab a relevant object to show your child/young person what is going to be different.

- A post-it note schedule can often be enough to plan a few activities in advance or to draw out what is changing.

- At times of stress, reduce the choices and show them, drawn or written on a page, whiteboard or post-it note.

- A check list.

- Have 'That's a surprise' cards. Practise this when your child/young person is having a good day so on bad days, the routine of seeing the surprise card will help dealing with the change. Allow lots of time.

Read more on this from Judy Endow here:

http://www.judyendow.com/visual-supports/creating-visuals-instantly-for-unpredictable-activities/

B. Occupational Therapy: Regulating Sensory Activities

We all have sensory preferences. For some of us, sensory sensitivities can have a significant impact on daily life. Sensitivity to noise, touch, smell or bright light may impact on a young person's attention and behaviour as well as contributing to increased anxiety levels. Be sensory aware and recognise that each child's sensory processing is unique to them.

- Having access to a quiet area will enable a young person to take a calming break when they are feeling overwhelmed. This may be a particular chair or floor beanbag, or a younger child may prefer a pop-up tent filled with squashy cushions.

Proprioceptive input (heavy work to the muscles and joints) and deep touch pressure can have a calming function.

Heavy work increases 'body awareness' which is both calming and organising. By helping us to feel more 'grounded' it can calm us when we are feeling over-stimulated or make us feel more alert whenever we are feeling sluggish.

Any activity against resistance that involves pulling, pushing, carrying heavy objects provides regulating proprioceptive input.

Activities which provide additional heavy work:

Some of these are more appropriate for younger children and some are more suitable for older children and teenagers.

- **Kiddie sandwiches** – play a game where you roll the child in a large towel, blanket or sleeping bag and then you push down firmly, but gently, pretending you are sandwiching them in. Use large floor cushions, place some on top of him and some underneath to make a 'hot dog'.

- **'Row, row, row your boat'** - Both sitting on the floor, pushing and pulling each other repetitively.

- **Trampoline** - Slow and controlled jumping on a mini-trampoline – this gives the child deep pressure through the joints and muscles and organising linear movement.

- **Space Hopper** - Bouncing on a space hopper or large ball – place your hands on their shoulders and push down slowly and rhythmically.

- **Pushing** weighted carts or boxes (across a carpeted floor for extra resistance).

- **Sandpit** - Playing in sandbox with damp, heavy sand.

- **Obstacle Courses** - These provide great regulating sensory experiences. Encourage your child to carry items to help make the obstacle course. Try to include activities that will allow your child to crawl and have different body positions.

- **Animal Walks**

  - Bear walk (walking on hands and feet)

  - Slithery Snake (move along ground on stomach)

  - Frog jumps / bunny hop

- Crab Walk (walking backwards on hands and feet)

- Tortoise Crawl (crawling with an object placed on back such as a soft toy, small bean bag or cushion)

- Seal Crawl (lying flat in prone position and propel forward using arms only)

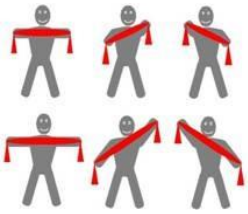
- **Take a short walk** – this can help to regulate the nervous system when a young person is feeling overwhelmed. Walking up hills and/or wearing a backpack with bottles of water in it will increase the resistance which will provide stronger regulating proprioceptive input.

- **Gardening** activities such as digging and pushing a wheelbarrow

- **Playing tug of war**

- **Doorway Chin-up bar**

- **Stretchy bands** – holding therapy band or a pair of thick tights in either hand, stretch it in a horizontal or vertical direction.



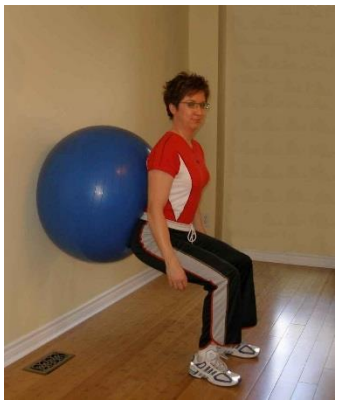
- **Stress Ball** - Using therapeutic putty or stress ball, providing heavy work to hands.

- **Exercises using a therapy ball or physio roll**

- Lying with your tummy on the ball, walk slowly forward on your hands as far as you can go, and then walk slowly backwards again.

- Try completing press-ups with tummy or legs supported by the ball.

- Lying on the ground on your tummy while someone rolls a therapy ball over you, applying deep pressure – like a massage!



- Squat - Squeeze the ball between your back and the wall, and roll it up and down the wall whilst you straighten and bend your knees.

Occupational Therapy: Oral Motor Activities

Children will often put things in their mouth, e.g. they may chew on collars, sleeves or pencils to help them concentrate or calm themselves. Chewing provides proprioceptive input (heavy work for jaw and cheeks) and can be calming and alerting depending on the individual's sensory need.

Foods are can also be chosen for their calming and alerting properties, for example, an adult may crave a cup of tea for calming purposes or crunchy snacks for alerting purposes.

Oral motor games can also provide a way of helping to regulate breathing.

Sensory based snacks:

- Use straws or water bottles to encourage sucking. Try using party straws or thicker drinks such as a milk shake to provide additional sensory input.

- Chewing is resistive and calming.

  Chewy foods include: Bagels or French/crusty bread
  Gummy sweets (wine gums) kept in fridge
  Liquorice
  Cereal bars
  Cheese

- Crunchy, cold and sour foods are alerting.

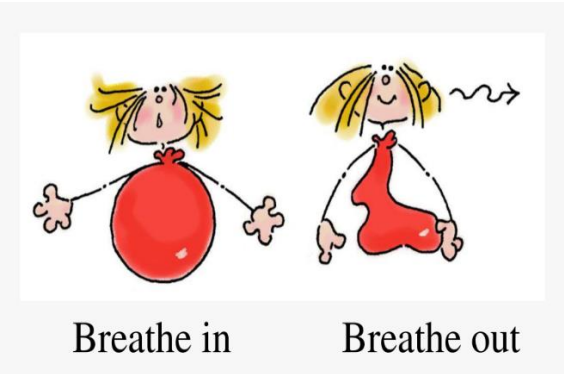
  Crunchy foods include: Apples
  Carrots
  Mints
  Pretzels or crackers
  Bread sticks

- A plate of cold grapes or partially frozen orange juice with a straw might be the perfect snack to give your child when he needs to stay on task or attend to homework.

- Chewing gum can have a calming and regulating sensory benefit. It is important that this is used therapeutically. Use when needed to self-calm or improve attention for focused tasks. Start with one piece; however, adding a 2nd piece will increase the sensory input. It is important to use "chewing gum rules", such as keeping it in your mouth, not swallowing, not touching with hands and wrapping in paper before putting in bin after use.

Breathing games:

- **Balloon breathing**



Think of your tummy as a balloon. Put your hand on your tummy to feel it rise and fall as you breathe. Take a deep breath through your nose to fill the balloon. Hold breath for 2 seconds. Breathe out through your mouth to slowly deflate your balloon. Repeat balloon breathing 5 times.

- **Bubble challenge**

Encouraging your child to blow big bubbles can be a great way of helping your child regulate their breathing when they are upset or frustrated. Demonstrate taking a big breath and blowing the bubbles slowly. The slower the child blows, the bigger the bubble will be.

Oral Motor games

- **20 Seconds -** Using raisins and a straw see how many you can suck up and move within twenty seconds. Increase the challenge by using small, light sweets (e.g. M&M's® Smarties® or Maltesers®)

- **Blow Lotto** (Played in pairs)

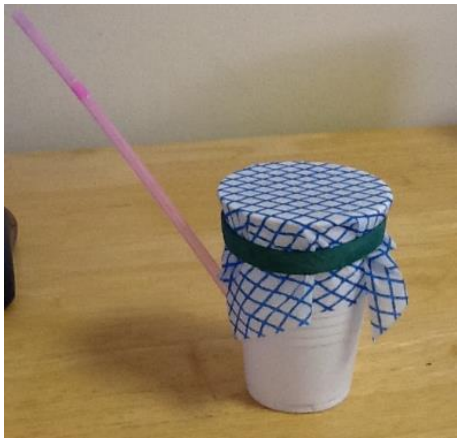
For this you need 3 identical sets of pictures, make the central frame by cutting and sticking straws around the grid. This will keep the cotton ball from rolling out of the picture. Each player takes it in turn to blow the cotton ball with a straw. You then match the picture your cotton ball lands on by placing a cotton ball on your individual grid. The winner is the player who gets 3 pictures in a row.

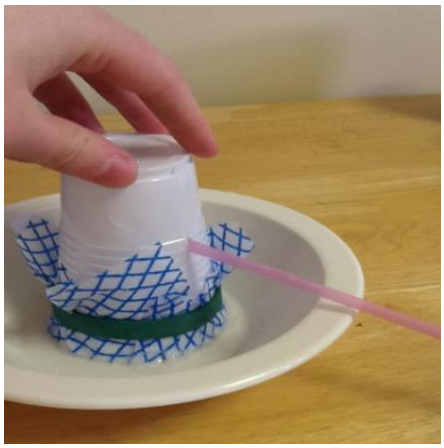
- **Table Football** (to be played in pairs)

For this you will need straws and a ping pong ball or foam ball. Set up barriers on the table to form sidelines to keep the balls flying over. Then by blowing through straws only, see who can force the ball off the opponent's end of the table.

- **Blowing bubbles**

For this, you will need a plastic cup, washing up liquid, elastic band, cloth, small dish, something sharp to pierce the cup and a straw.





- Pierce the side of the cup so that there is room for the straw to go through.
- Cover the top of the cup with the cloth and secure with elastic band.
- Fill a shallow dish/bowl with washing up liquid and small amount of water; rub the top of the cloth into the mixture.
- Blow down the straw to see bubbles appear out of the cup.

- **Bubble snake**

For this, you will need a plastic bottle, scissors, washing up liquid, dishcloth and elastic band.

- Cut bottom off water bottle.
- Cover with dish cloth, securing with elastic band.
- Fill shallow dish with water and washing up liquid. Dip cloth covered end into mixture.
- Blow the top of the bottle to make bubbles.
- See how long you can make your snake before it falls.

Adaptations: Add food colouring drops to the cloth-covered end of the bottle to make colourful bubble snakes.

- **Cup Races** (activity for pairs)

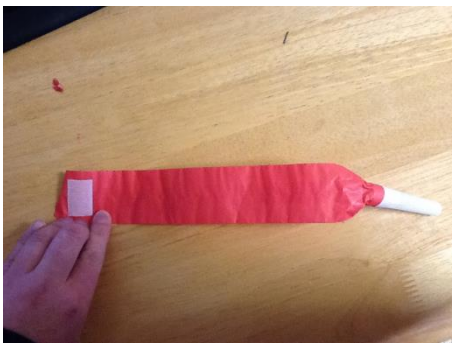
For this you will need string, 2 plastic cups, 2 chairs (or places to tie string at each end), and scissors.

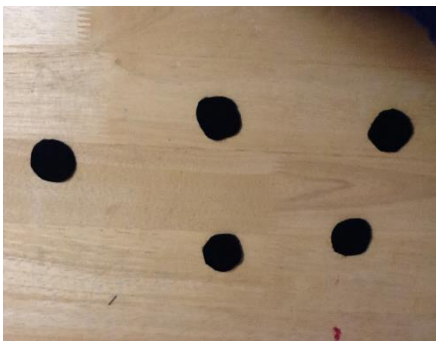
- Pierce a hole in the bottom of the cup.
- Cut 2 lengths of string (same size) and thread a cup on to each.
- Attach ends to the chairs ensuring that there is a gap between the two strings.
- Move the cups so they are at the 'start' line.
- Race to see who can blow their cup to the finish line the fastest.

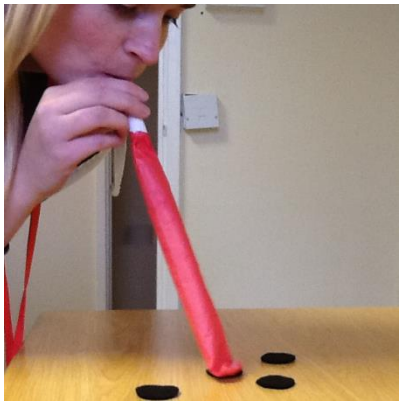
- **Catching Flies**

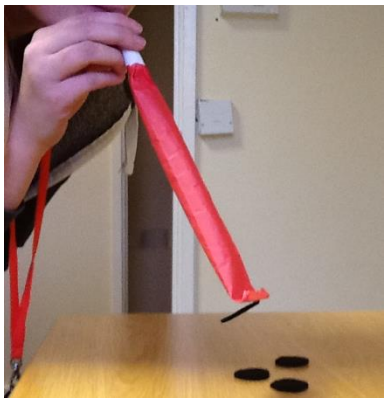
For this you will need a party blower, pieces of felt to form the 'flies', piece of Velcro.

- Attach piece of Velcro to end of party blower.
- Lay out the 'flies' on to table or floor.
- Use the party blower to pick up as many flies as you can.



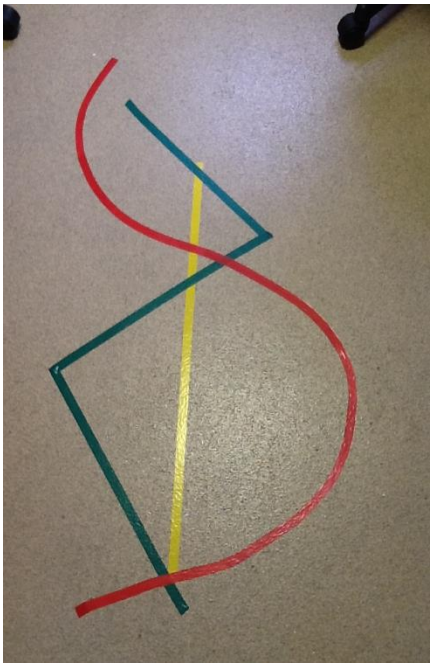


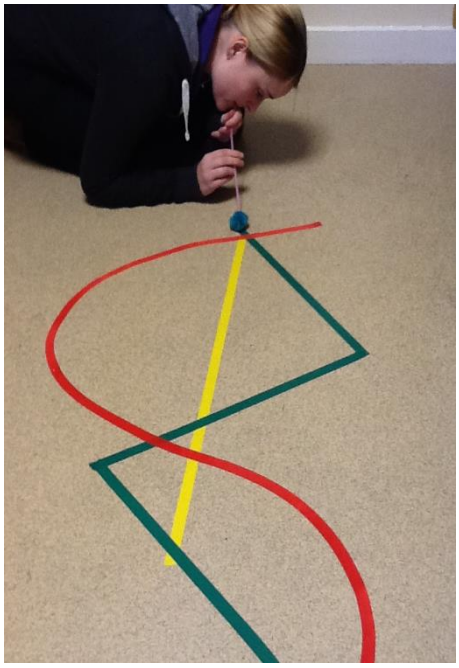


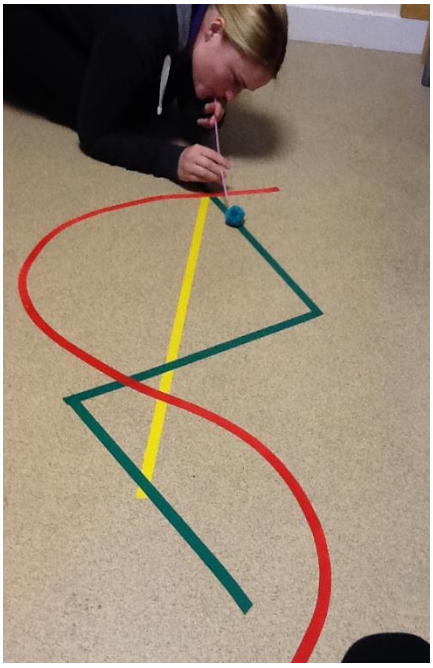


- **Coloured Lines**

For these you will need 3 different coloured masking tapes with matching coloured pompoms and some straws





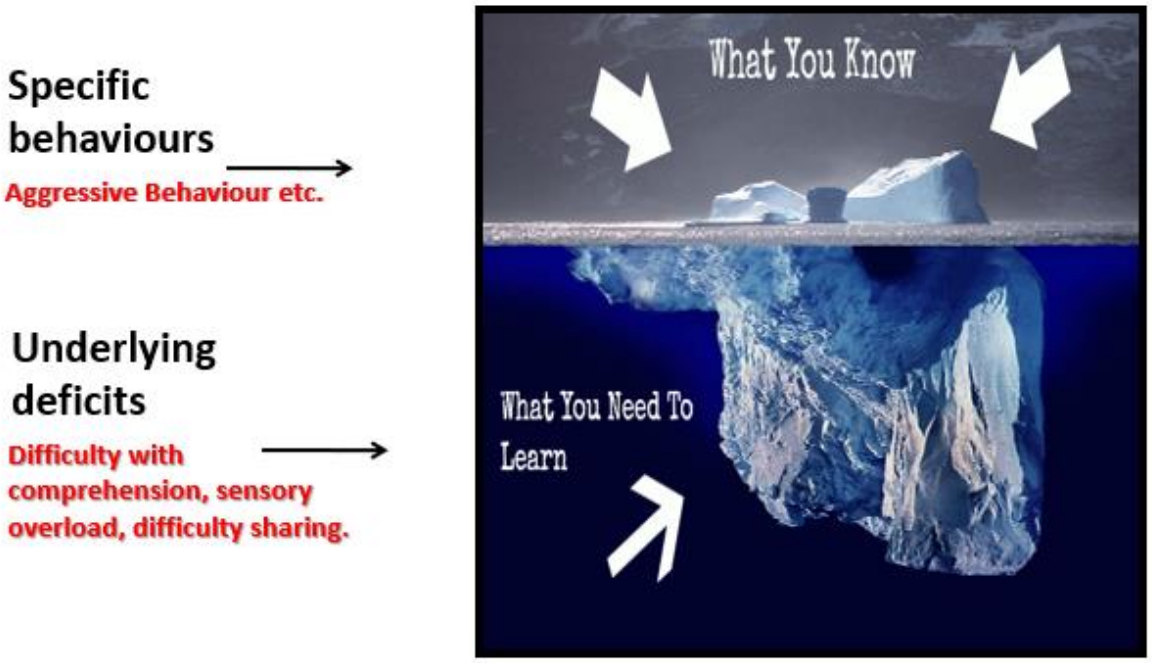


- Stick the tape on the floor forming different shaped lines e.g. curvy, jagged, and straight.
- Place the matching pompom at the start of the line.
- Using the straw, blow the pompom along the line, trying to keep it as close to the line as possible.

C. Managing Meltdowns at Home

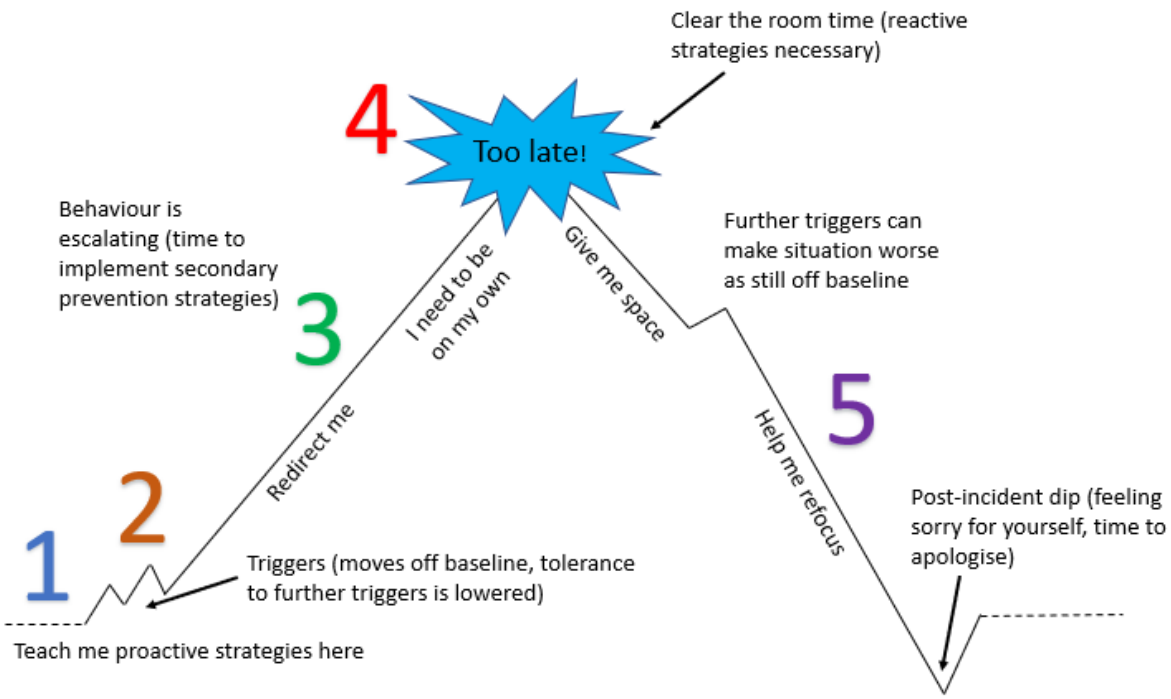
Why do meltdowns occur?

Think of behaviour like an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg represents the behaviour that we see, the hitting out, kicking, shouting. The part of the iceberg which is below the surface of the water represents some of the reasons which might help explain the behaviour.



It is possible to implement strategies to **PREVENT** these behaviours occurring in the first instance. Many of the strategies already mentioned in this booklet will be beneficial for prevention (e.g. visual schedules, sensory and emotional regulation activities).

However, sometimes it will be necessary to implement strategies when the child is heading for a meltdown.



During the build up

- Redirection – help your child to focus on something other than the activity which is causing them to be upset. Complete another task, focus on their special interest, or use techniques suggest by Occupational Therapy (e.g. wall presses, chair push-ups, weighted blanket).

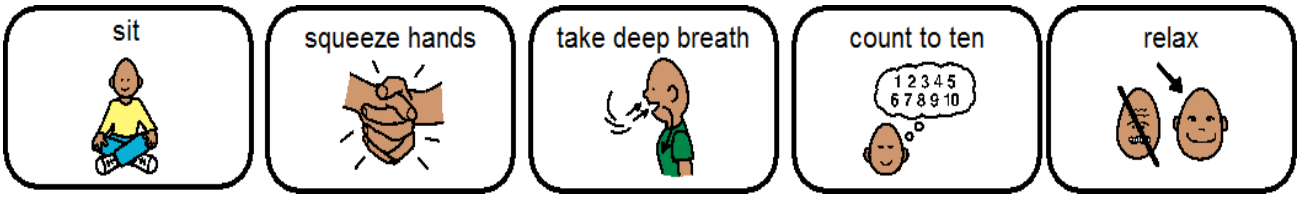
- Walk, don't talk – walk with your child without talking. The child is allowed to talk about whatever they want; as an adult you should remain calm and react a little as possible.

- Stress Kit – this can help focus your child's attention on a more positive experience. This can include items such as sensory toys, bubble wrap, ear plugs, calming music, books, or their special interest.

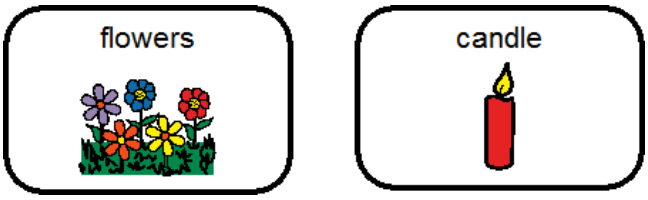
- Lead your child to a quiet, calm part of the house – have a space set with very few distractions, use your stress kit, if appropriate.

- Self-calming strategies – at a time when your child is already calm, teach them calming strategies, which they can complete themselves if they feel they are progressing towards a meltdown. You can use a visual for your child to follow. Consider practicing some of the following strategies with your child when they are calm.

  - **Calming Sequence**



  - **Deep Breaths –** breath through your nose (to smell the flowers) and breath out (to blow out the candle)



  - **Star Breathing –** trace your finger along the star, following the instructions of breathing in, holding your breath, then breathing out**.**

During the meltdown

- Avoid social interaction – this is **NOT** the time to communicate verbally with your child. This may only make the behaviours escalate further.

- Do **NOT** teach new calming skills – when your child is in a heightened state, they will be unable to retain this information and apply the skills. Teach these skills when your child is calm, and have a few practices of applying each skill.

- Ensure the area around the child is safe – remove anything in the surrounding area which may be breakable, or could injure your child. If your child tries to headbutt a hard surface such as a wall or table, place a cushion there to reduce the impact.

- Try to stay calm yourself – it is important that we can model calm behaviour for our children when they are in this heightened state.

After the meltdown

- Give space – provide some time for your child to calm and let off some steam.

- Use calming strategies – use some of the calming and relaxation strategies mentioned earlier.

- Once calm, re-direct to another activity.

- Be prepared in case the cycle repeats itself.

D. Maintaining a Good Sleep Routine

There are several reasons why a child/young person may have difficulty with their sleep, particularly with the current change in routine.

If you are concerned about your child's sleep, it is often a good idea to keep a sleep diary. This allows you to identify any patterns in your child's sleep which can help you understand why they may be finding things more difficult. It is worth considering any events, which have happened during the day, and your child's actions on the lead up to bedtime.

Some possible reasons for troubled sleep include:

An over-stimulating room – Does your child get out of bed to play with their toys? Distractions in a child's room can delay them from settling.

Noise – Are there any noises inside or outside the home that may be disturbing your child? Some children/young people with sensory issues are particularly sensitive to noise therefore what may seem like a really quiet sound to us may appear rather loud to them, and affect their ability to settle and fall asleep. Masking sounds in your home with something like a white noise app can help if noise is an issue for your child.

Light – Is the room dark enough? Melatonin (our natural sleep hormone) is produced in the evening when the light starts to dim, which is why it is a good idea to put your child to sleep in a dark room. Black-out blinds can be purchased to help keep the room dark at bedtime.

Bedding – Is your child kicking the bedding off during the night and getting cold? If so, you could consider a sleep suit for your child or tucking a double duvet under a single mattress to stop it coming off during the night. Some children have found it helpful to use a sensory compression sheet, which provides extra pressure for those children who need that to settle.

Our activities in the daytime and evening can predict our sleep that evening. Here are some tips:

- **During the day**
  - Try to get as much natural daylight as possible
  - Avoid too much caffeine, this includes fizzy drinks, especially leading up to bedtime
  - Try to find ways of dealing with worry. For some children/young people, this could be writing down their worries and popping them into a 'worry box,' so that they can forget about them until another time.
  - Try to avoid daytime napping.

- **During the evening**
  - Avoid any stimulating activities. TV, tablets and phones emit a blue light which inhibits our body's production of melatonin (which helps us sleep)
  - Don't eat a large meal too close to bedtime. A light supper like toast, cereal and milk is good.
  - Try to get schoolwork out of the way early in the day so it is not a worry in the evening time.

Some strategies to support sleep:

Settling: Many children/young people with additional needs struggle to settle themselves to sleep.

- If you stay with your child until they go to sleep, you may need to distance yourself gradually to enable them to settle alone. There is a strategy, called the 'Disappearing Chair,' which you can try. This works in stages; each stage could take a few days or weeks depending on your child, but it is important to do this gradually.

Disappearing Chair

Remember that each stage may take days or weeks. You should not move on to the next stage until the current stage is successful.

Stage 1: Parent sits on a chair beside the bed, maintaining physical contact (e.g. touch on arm or hand but no stroking) until child falls asleep.
Stage 2: Parent sits on a chair beside the bed, no physical contact.
Stage 3: Parent sits on a chair which has been moved further away from the bed and closer to the door.
Stage 4: Parent sits on a chair at the door, but inside the room.
Stage 5: Parent sits on a chair at the door, outside the room.
Stage 6: Child settled in room alone.

- Once you have turned the lights out, and said goodnight, do not engage in conversation with your child – become the 'boring' parent. Try using a 'broken record' phrase such as "It's bedtime, go to sleep," if your child tries to continue to interact with you after this. If you engage in conversation with your child, after bedtime has been established, they are being rewarded socially for remaining awake, so try to avoid this.

Bedtime routines: Routine is very important at bedtime. We tend to thrive on routines and children/young people with additional needs especially will respond positively to having structure at bedtime. Once a routine has been established it is important to keep this consistent throughout the week even if your child is staying elsewhere for the night.

When creating a routine, it is helpful to decide what time, you would like your child to be in bed, and work back from this (despite not going to school right now). If bath-time is incorporated into this routine ideally it should occur at least half an hour before your child goes to sleep so their body temperature has time to regulate; a warm bath can increase body temperature and lead to difficulty sleeping.

Visual Timetables: A visual timetable is a way of demonstrating to a child what they can expect to happen in the lead up to bedtime using pictures and symbols. It may be useful to display the routine that you will be using at bedtime to help them to become familiar with the order of events. Some of the visual strategies mentioned earlier in this booklet will be useful.

Explaining sleep: Some children can have difficulty understanding the concept of sleep and the need for it. A social story could be used to explain this and help them settle, for example; 'All people sleep... They wake up each morning. I sleep in a bed. Usually Mum or Dad says, "Time to go to bed." This means it is time to get into bed and go to sleep.

Rewarding your child: It is important to remain positive with your child about bedtime which should help reduce any anxiety associated with it. Give your child praise at bedtime for what they are doing well and give consistent rewards until the behaviour is firmly established.

E. Looking after yourself

During this difficult time, everyone is feeling the strain of our lives looking a little bit different for now. It is so important that we all take some time for self-care and look after ourselves in the coming weeks and months.

Imagine you are being chased by a tiger! Your body's natural response will usually be either:

- **FIGHT (attack the bear with a weapon)**
- **FLIGHT (run…..fast!)**
- **FREEZE (freeze on the spot in a panic)**

This is the same with anything that our brain perceives as a threat (e.g. COVID-19). Anxiety and stress are normal responses to the ongoing pandemic, but if you are feeling this way, then it may be more difficult to care for others. This anxiety and stress also makes it more difficult to think rationally and to consider others' emotions.

We also tend to pay more attention to perceived threats than we would for anything else. Do you find yourself googling coronavirus, talking about coronavirus, reading on social media about coronavirus? It's hard to avoid it.

It is important that we look at ways to calm, and look after ourselves during this time to help us manage the threat more appropriately. Here are some strategies you can try to implement in your daily lives.

- **Recognise the signs**

It is good to notice when you may be starting to feel anxious and stressed. Is your heart beating fast? Are you feeling hot and sweaty? Do you feel your thoughts racing? Are you thinking of the worst-case scenario (catastrophising)?

When you recognise the signs early, you will be able to think more rationally to implement some of the self-care strategies.

- **Keep in touch**

While we are all staying at home as much as possible, it is normal that we will start to feel isolated, and perhaps lonely. It is good to link in with our friends and family by phone, messenger or even video link! It is important that we stay connected with our loved ones.

- **Eat healthily**

During this time of worry, take care of your body. Try to eat a well-balanced diet, consuming all the food groups. Take some of the time at home to research some recipes you would like to try. There are lots of 'fakeaway' recipes online for those of us who are missing our weekend takeaway!

- **Sleep**

Our daily routines are a bit different for now. Try to keep your sleep routine as consistent as possible, sticking to a regular bedtime and wake up time. Try to switch off electronic devices (e.g. TV, tablet, phone) at least 1 hour before you go to bed. If thoughts are rushing around in your head, try to write these down to deal with the following day.

- **Exercise**

It is good to get fresh air and exercise, even if it is just in your back garden or a walk around your street. Keep up to date with new guidance published by the government. At present, we can leave our homes to exercise once a day. There are many apps and free YouTube tutorials you can follow at home.

- **Focus on the present**

Mindfulness exercises are a really good way of relaxing, coping with unhelpful thoughts and becoming more self-aware. Mindfulness doesn't need to take long; a few minutes (or even seconds) each day can have a positive impact. Mindfulness is about bringing your attention to the present, rather than focusing on the future or the past. Instead it is about focusing on what is going on around us, and the sensations we are experiencing at that one time. There are lots of apps for this, like 'Headspace' and 'Calm'.

- **Switch off**

Put away your phone and switch off the news. Instead, catch up on a series on Netflix, watch a good movie, read the book that has been sitting on your bedside table or do a family activity. Take time away from the constant refreshing of your social media to get the latest updates and do something enjoyable.

Useful Contact Numbers

Autism Intervention Service: 028 95 042301

Gateway (Social Services): 028 90 507000