



WASHINGTON  
BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE  
ASSOCIATES, LLC

THE SOAR PROGRAM  
FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY & TESTING

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*Presentation by Jaclyn Halpern, Psy.D., hosted online on April 30, 2020 by Partnership for Extraordinary Minds (xMinds) as part of a webinar series supporting parents of ASD students during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

**Understanding and Managing Challenging Behavior During Distance Learning:**

**Focusing on ASD Students**

**Given the impact of COVID-19, the implementation of Distance Learning, and related changes these are some challenges you might see in children of any age:**

- Regression
- Self-isolation
- Poor emotional control/meltdowns/mood swings
- Defiance/opposition, even increased aggression
- Inflexibility/Rigidity and attempts to gain control
- Increased signs of Depression, anxiety, and/or stress
- Retreat to Screens
- Fearfulness
- Increased reliance on routines
- Restricted and repetitive behaviors, potentially including obsessions and/or compulsions
- Spending increased time in preferred activities (at the expense of academics)
- Signs of confusion/distress related to change in routine
- Clinginess
- Increased stimming/sensory seeking behaviors
- Poor focus and distractibility
- Changes to sleeping and eating habits
- Trouble with transitions (especially from screens and other preferred activities)

**But it may not be all bad. Some children are doing well. You might see...**

- Reduced anxiety
- Increased calm
- More positive interaction with family

- Excitement to be learning in a new way
- Relief at not having to navigate school-based social/sensory/cognitive/emotional/language demands
- Opportunities to explore passions and interests
- Improved social skill expression over screens
- Increased self-expression
- Improved focus

### **What factors are causing the challenging emotions and behaviors?**

- Sudden changes to routine
- Lack of control
- Lack of familiar structure
- Underlying vulnerabilities with flexibility
- Lack of socialization/feeling isolated
- Lack of access to ‘real life’ direct services and regular school and community-based caregivers (e.g., feeling abandoned by teachers, therapists)
- Difficulties with utilizing the screen to connect and receive services
- Sensory overstimulation from screen time
- Distraction from/desire for screen availability and usage
- Exposure to news/information about COVID-19 that is too much to process/difficult to understand
- Uncertainty of how long this goes on
- Lack of movement and exercise/lack of movement catered to the child’s specific needs (OT, PT, etc.)
- Home is NOT school, nor should it be – loss of school environment, home may not feel as ‘safe’
- Feeling parent/family/caregiver stress, fear, and grief
- Loss of favorite places to visit
- Underlying ADHD, Anxiety, and other comorbidities
- Difficulty understanding COVID-19, and understanding and communicating feelings related to COVID-19 and related changes

### **Why might some children be doing well?**

- Reduced pressure to socialize ‘in real time’
- More time to think before responding to questions and prompts
- Increased comfort communicating through a screen
- Reduced academic pressure
- More downtime/time for preferred activities
- More time with family/caregivers
- Potentially more time outdoors
- Reduced time commuting between home, school, and therapies
- Reduced pressure given fewer transitions
- Feeling free to be themselves
- Reduced cognitive, language, academic, sensory, and social-emotional demands

- Ability to be in comfortable clothes, in a comfortable space
- Self-pacing
- Feeling understood because social distancing may feel comfortable
- Fewer distractions

**Specific considerations based on age/developmental level and specific populations:**

- **Younger or developmentally younger children** may struggle with attention to screen-based activities because attentional control is naturally weaker. They may find it difficult to focus and engage without being present in the school setting. They may struggle to get their sensorimotor needs met, leading to more acting out behaviors. Alternatively, they may also really enjoy the increased family time and the opportunity to explore their interests. Most importantly, children this age need to play. They will learn through play.
- **Tweens and Teens** may be struggling with managing screen time without turning to preferred activities (e.g., gaming, YouTube). They may also be more aware of the passage of time, and may feel more distressed by the uncertainty around COVID-19, distance learning, etc. Some tweens and teens may miss their social connections, while others may experience reduced social pressure. Some may even feel more comfortable socializing in the ways social distancing requires. Tweens and teens may also feel reduced academic pressure, and benefit from fewer transitions.

Particularly with this age group (though important with all), be on the lookout for **cyber-bulling**. *Monitor your child's social media, regardless of age.* Pay attention to the people they are interacting with, and what is being said. If your child seems notably down, withdrawn, irritable, angry, or aggressive after using social media, be particularly vigilant. Additionally, monitoring is also recommended so that you can be on the lookout for those who might take advantage of more vulnerable youth. If need be, let your child know in advance you will be doing 'social media' spot checks, or set a regular time for check-ins. Make a rule in advance that you have access to all apps and passwords.

- **Nonverbal children** may be showing increased aggression and acting out behavior due to difficulty expressing their confusion and fear surrounding COVID-19, related distance learning, and other changes. Those with receptive language difficulties, no matter their intellectual ability, may be even more confused, as they struggle to make sense of the changes in their life. Alternatively, nonverbal children may feel increased comfort spending more time with caregivers who know them best, and better understand their communication styles.

Another challenge with nonverbal children, or those who struggle to express emotions, is that it can be difficult to determine what, exactly, is causing them to act out. In the current situation, for example, it could be fully related to the COVID-19/distance learning situation, or fully unrelated. Sometimes allowing children to look at different visuals to show their feelings can be helpful with this. You can also use pictures and have them point to what is making them feel badly (e.g., a picture of someone sick, a picture of someone standing far away from friends, etc.). That said, all children sometimes struggle to understand their own feelings, and may not even know why they feel or act the way they do. The best thing we can do is respond with empathy and try to remember that our kids are doing the best they can.

## A Bit of Perspective during COVID-19:

- **Keep in mind changes you are seeing in behavior and mood are highly likely to be temporary.** They are not forever. COVID-19 has thrown a curve ball to everyone's functioning. Neurotypical children and adults, and parents of neurotypical children are struggling too.
- **Sometimes it helps to know that everyone is struggling. This is not a normal situation.** Dr. Ross Greene says, "*Kids do well if they can.*" If not, we must look for the lagging skill. COVID-19 has pushed all our lagging skills to the forefront.
  - *Parents are exhausted and fearful. Kids are scared, confused, disappointed, and thrown completely off their routine.* They see parental stress and they may not understand. This builds on their own underlying unease. They look to us for stability and that is hard for us to provide given the circumstances. We, ourselves, feel unstable. That is expected and ok. To help our kids, we *need* to allow our own emotions and take care of ourselves too.
  - *Parents cannot possibly take on every role.* We cannot work full-time, parent full-time, serve as therapists full-time, and teach full-time. We need to give ourselves and our kids a break.
  - *It is ok to feel negative emotions about how schools and providers are handling these situations. But, try to remember that no one planned for this, and everyone is doing their best.* Many teachers and providers are at home with their own kids, dealing with their own difficulties in balancing and challenging behaviors. They may not be tech savvy or have any idea how to do their job through a screen.
  - *This is not just distance learning (or distance working).* This is distance learning and distance working during the time of a crisis. It is hard for everyone to focus. Reactions about the population range from disturbance of the norm (not necessarily negative for some) to trauma.
  - *Just "OK" or "hanging in" is expected for now.* Not ok and changeable emotions are also expected. You'll notice that throughout this presentation I say, "It's ok." That is because that while things may not be ideal, decisions, changes, and emotions that occur in managing this situation are "ok."

### What can you do to make the best of the situation?

#### First, meet your own needs.

Take care of yourself. This is particularly challenging if you find yourself suddenly in the role of working full-time, teaching full-time, and parenting full-time.

- **You may have to work with other caregivers to come up with a schedule so that you can each take breaks.** Communicate with your spouse, family members, etc. to balance responsibilities. Sit down and make a schedule and plan if you need to do so.

- **Plan a little “me” time.** Think about things that help you reset and set aside time for them as many days each week as possible (e.g., meditation, exercise, getting outside, taking a shower or bath).
- **Take the time to ‘tune in’ to your own emotions.** We are all finding ourselves on an emotional roller coaster right now. We need to attend to our own feelings.
- **If you think you might be showing or expressing increased negative emotions, it is recommended that you communicate with your children about them.** Let them know that you are ok and here for them, but that you are feeling upset by all the changes COVID-19 has caused as well. Share that you are tired and struggling with balance (in developmentally appropriate ways for your children). Let your kids know you love them, they are safe, they have done nothing wrong, and they are not the cause of your emotions. If you have a rough moment (or several), apologize, take responsibility and reassure your child.
- **Reach out to your support system.** Friends, family, and community members can help, even from afar. If you have a therapist, be sure to keep appointments. If you need a therapist or a support group, reach out for help.
- **Pay attention to when enough is enough.** You may have to prioritize responsibilities, and let some things fall by the wayside right now. That is ok. If dishes do not get washed, or laundry does not get done, but you and your kids have a positive interaction, you have accomplished a lot.
- **Reach out to your child’s providers.** Therapists of every kind are eager to help. If screens are not effective for your child’s therapy, your therapists will likely help you work out ways to help your children at home. Do what you can. When it feels like too much, take a break from services.
- **Create a schedule.** When creating a schedule, keep in mind the time you need for work and self-care, and plan around that. You may have to use weekends to cover everything, from school to work but that is ok. You might also choose to leave weekends for relaxation. That is great too. Your kids will learn through their play and experience.
- **Brainstorm ways to occupy your children when you must work.** You might rely on another caregiver or online tutor, allow them to engage in set amounts of screen time, or allow them to enjoy other preferred, independent activities.

Next, help your child(ren) manage the ‘load’ and the changes.

- **Reach out to teachers and other school staff on your child’s team.** Let them know what is happening at home. They may be able to help you with strategies that work at school, give you examples of visual schedules and phrases they use, talk with you about incentives that work at school, and even work with you on a more individualized learning plan for your child. If your child’s school offers services that are not working for your child, talk to the teacher and/or provider. See if changes are possible. If they are not, or if the changes do not work, pause for

now. Your child will learn through play, interests, and/or whatever school-based support is working.

- **Find tutors to help with schoolwork.** If you can hire special education tutors to support your child 1:1, consider doing so for areas of need. You might also consider hiring a college student, teacher, or neighbor (some may even be volunteering tutoring services), to ‘sit’ with your student (on screen) to increase accountability and to take the pressure off of parents. This will likely reduce some tension and conflict at home.
- **Let your children learn through play and through their interests, regardless of their developmental level.** Get creative. Lean into their interests and see what lessons you can teach, or what areas of study they can explore, based on them. They can practice reading, writing, and math skills in this non-traditional manner. They can learn Science and Social Studies. Join with your child in this play and learning and allow ‘independent study.’
- **Keep in mind that developmentally and/or diagnostically, your child may not be able to focus for the amount of time required by distance learning.** For example, I have seen four-year olds who are expected to sit at a screen, learning for an hour. That is simply developmentally inappropriate. Be gentle, allow breaks, let go of work/screen learning that is too much for your child, and celebrate and embrace any and all success, no matter how small.
- **Set up the work environment(s) to meet your child’s needs.** Choose quiet, non-distracting spaces, but allow music, other sounds, fidgets, and movement to meet your child’s specific needs. Allow your child to sit, stand, lay, or move. If your child does best with one space for work, great. If not, let your child choose different spaces as needed. Consider different chairs, lighting, and background noise if that helps your child.
- **Consider non-academic needs that may help your child manage academics, or simply feel more safe and secure.**
  - *Sensory Regulation is Key.* Talk with your child’s OT if you have one, so that you can plan an appropriate sensory diet. Give children opportunities for heavy and light work, movement breaks, spinning, swinging, jumping, brushing, pressing (e.g., weighted blankets, massages), and interactions with a variety of sensory materials (e.g., sensory table, art supplies, sand). Consider putting together a sensory toolkit with some of your child’s favorite things (e.g., smelling oils, fidgets), and/or reducing sensory input as needed with noise canceling headphones, low light, quiet space, etc. **Make sure movement breaks, sensory breaks, and fine/gross motor activities are incorporated into the day. These may need to be more frequent than at school.**
  - *Balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, fresh air, and exercise should be a priority every day.* If your child enjoys cooking and/or baking, this is a great way to learn and to bond, as well!

- *Consider daily meditation or mindfulness practices.* Consider yoga. Utilize expressive techniques like art, dance, music, etc.
- *Set realistic screen time limits.* You might need to allow more screen time than usual, and that is ok. Think about when and how you want to limit screen time. Some of this is age dependent, and some children may need monitoring. Others may be more independent.
- **Maintain a daily schedule.** If possible, talk to your child’s teacher/school about any visual and verbal cues that help your child and/or that your child will recognize. Review the schedule each morning. The depth of the schedule can vary from highly structured (e.g., specific details for each 30-60-minute period) to less structured (e.g., wake up, eat breakfast, school time, outside time, free play). If you have not used a schedule before, you might try different levels of structure to see which works best both for you and your child. *When you can, collaborate with your child when planning the schedules, or even when creating the schedule (e.g., let your child draw the different activities; utilize post-it notes, Velcro, etc.).*
- **Maintain productive routines** like getting dressed in the morning, engaging in hygiene, organizing school materials, etc.
- **When possible use visual cues and schedules, and when possible, let your children check these off as they go.** With nonverbal children and those who struggle to communicate emotions, it is even more important to utilize visual cues for routines and schedules. It is also important to look for nonverbal cues that let you know how your child is feeling and needing. You can also look to joint attention to improve communication.
- **Particularly for younger children, create different ‘centers’ in your home.** Reduce distractions in areas where schoolwork is completed. Make sure activities are appealing and multi-sensory.
- **Utilize social stories, books, and TV shows to explore feelings and to continue to teach social skills.** This can be fun, can promote bonding, and can aid learning.

*Finally, and most important for your child(ren)’s well-being, help them feel safe and secure.*

Your children cannot learn if they are feeling unsafe. The positive, secure attachment between parents and children is the priority. If this becomes destabilized, and simply to ensure that it is prioritized, try the following:

- **Consider positive parenting techniques.** For example, Drs. Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, Dr. Ross Greene, and Dr. Dan Shapiro all have excellent books/websites that teach such techniques. If consequences are necessary, use brief, logical consequences. When possible, instead seek positive, relationally based incentives and a sense of accomplishment to motivate positive action. If reward systems work for your family, keep them immediate, and keep the expectations clear.

- **Empathize with your child.** Provide lots of love and affection, in whatever way your child enjoys. Praise frequently. Accept some of the negative behaviors as necessary ways of expressing feelings and distress during this difficult time. You might sometimes be able to name and normalize your child's emotions, other times, just being present and calm will help. Make all emotions acceptable, and teach positive coping skills (e.g., breathing, exercising, squeezing and relaxing muscles, drawing, etc.)
- **Look for ways in which your child is successful.** Look for their interests. Praise frequently. Join with your child Try to focus on what is going well. Pick a few challenges to address at a given time and limit your focus.
- **Parents, family members, and the family home need to remain a place of security and comfort.** It may be difficult to achieve this when home is now also school. Some kids are likely to handle this change easily, or even to thrive within it. But others may struggle with this big change. If school is challenging for your child, and home has always been an escape, home might start to feel uncomfortable. Additionally, parents and children may experience increased tension and arguments because of schoolwork. If this is happening, something needs to give.
- **Again, talk to therapists and providers.** They can help you create and implement plans, and to overcome hurdles.
- **Determine what really needs to happen each day and focus on that.** Again, be gentle on yourself and your child. *As scary as it is for kids to fall behind, there will be opportunities to catch up. If they feel loved and safe, they will thrive, and other needs can be met later.* Do what is working and what you can afford, let go of what is not.
- **Help your child feel cared for by other important adults in their lives.** If your child is feeling abandoned by teachers, providers, or friends, help them "stand in their shoes." Talk to them about what might be going on in those other people's lives now. Help them figure out ways to reach out to those they miss/need. With teachers and providers, you might reach out and share your child's concerns, and help arrange a way to connect.
- **As much as possible, follow through on recommendations for OTs, SLPs, PTs etc. to help children with each of their needs.** Maintaining sensory diets and exercise might help offset negative behaviors. You can even observe and keep track of changes you see when kids are on/off their regimens. Similarly, particularly for nonverbal children, sticking with communication plans (created and assisted by your SLPs) may help your child express themselves.
- **When creating screen time limits, think about when screen time transitions are most likely to be positive.** Provide countdowns, follow screen time with other preferred tasks, and ideally, shut down screens two hours before bedtime, regardless of your child's age.
- **Make sure that your child has opportunities for down time every day.** Again, let your child play and explore passions and interests. When you can, join with them in these.



- **Try to give at least 15-20 minutes of non-distracted, full attention to each child, each day.** Put electronics away (including your own), and make sure other children are occupied. If possible, let your child lead the activities (within safe, reasonable parameters).
- **Consider creating household roles and chores.** Giving children responsibilities that are age and developmentally appropriate can promote confidence, help your child feel valuable, and build leadership skills.
- **If expectations and responsibilities are new or different, set a family meeting and discuss them first.** This way, expectations are clear, understood, and agreed upon.
- **Try to make things fun!** Get creative. If you and your child/family generally enjoy online activities together, try something new. Inside and outside scavenger hunts or obstacle courses, board games and drawing/acting games (e.g., Pictionary), family movie nights, etc. There are tons of great ideas on social media for activities to fill your children's days.
- **Give choices.** Help your child feel a sense of control by giving choices within limits that are comfortable for you (e.g., you can eat an apple or a banana, which would you prefer?)

### **Resources and Planning**

#### Positive Parenting

Dr. Ross Greene: [livesinthebalance.org](http://livesinthebalance.org)

Dr. Dan Siegel: [m.drdansiegel.com](http://m.drdansiegel.com)

Dr. Tina Bryson: [tinabryson.com](http://tinabryson.com)

Dr. Dan Shapiro: [parentchildjourney.com](http://parentchildjourney.com)

Janet Lansbury: [janetlansbury.com](http://janetlansbury.com)

#### COVID-19 Specific Resources

I know it is controversial, but **Autism Speaks** has laid out a variety of resources for families that may be worth exploring. You can take or leave information and options based on your needs. There are articles, and links to workshops and training modules, teaching stories and visual supports, and educational resources, for example. ([autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org))

Consider the **Coronavirus Tool Kit** modules ([debrechilidpsychiatry.org](http://debrechilidpsychiatry.org)). There are also excellent articles about supporting nonverbal children, increasing autonomy, managing sensory needs, managing tics, managing agitation and impulsivity, managing medication decision, homeschooling, managing organization, managing eating, improving motivation, and more.

**Childmind.org** has excellent suggestions as well. For example, they recommend putting together an emergency plan/kit that your children and other caregivers can find in case someone becomes sick.

## Medication Management

If your child is medicated, or if you are considering medication, speak to your provider. I generally recommend child psychiatrists because they are the specialists. Some children are requiring more medication while at home, others require the same, and some are going off medications entirely. If you are considering medication for the first time, ask questions, share concerns, and do not feel pressure to make a decision 'on the spot,' but have a conversation with a provider to understand the potential pros and cons. If you plan to decrease or increase medications, please do so with direct supervision by your provider.

### **Addressing Questions not addressed directly within the presentation**

*If your child is struggling to focus on the task at hand:*

Limit external distractions. If your child seems not to hear you, try to use physical cues to gain attention (gentle touch, deep pressure). Seek eye (or at least facial) contact. Try joining with your child to ask, draw, or show what she/he is thinking about. Try to engage your child in a conversation or activity related to the task at hand. Try to apply the task at hand to a real-life interest or experience. Try a movement break if your child continues to struggle with focus.

*If your child's school's distance learning plan is not working:*

Again, speak with teachers and your child's team to try to make changes. If this still does not work, it is ok to let some, or even all, of the formalized learning go for now. Utilize interests to educate.

*Addressing Social and Emotional Skills:*

There are many free and reduced fee groups in our area at present. These can aid social skills development and peer interaction. You can also schedule screen dates with friends and family members to work on social cues. As noted, social stories, tv shows, and books can also be used for this. Slow down, pause, and talk about facial expressions, character motivation, predictions, etc. There are even some children's books about social distancing (e.g., Time to Come in Bear), and many about emotional matters (e.g., Magination Press)

*As far as implementing a BIP at home, and/or understanding the support your child's school can provide:*

This varies based on every child, and every team. I would strongly encourage you to reach out to your child's team to find out their support plans if you have not heard from them already, or if the current plan is not working. The team should be able to help you transition and modify strategies for the home environment. They can also let you know what support is (and is not available) so you can decide what to do at home, what to seek privately, what to ask for from school, and what to 'pause.'

*If Zoom classes are not working:*

Let them go. If your child is not engaging with his/her class, consider one-on-one or small group interactions, text, email, or even gaming for interaction.

*Talk to your children about the things they are missing, like playgrounds and swimming.*

You can name these for them if they are nonverbal or if they have trouble pinpointing them. See if you can find ways to create similar fun at home (e.g., 'swim' in the tub or a blow up pool, run in sprinklers if it is warm, do water play at the sink or outside; create obstacle courses with your child to offset the loss of a playground experience, etc.). Empathize with the distress and sadness.

*If your child becomes aggressive, protect yourself, your other children, and your home, and try to keep your aggressive child safe as well.*

This can be hard to do. If more than one caregiver is present, one should remove other children, and one should stay at a safe distance from the aggressive child. Stay calm, if it is safe to do so, sit below your child's eye level, stay quiet or speak in a calm soothing voice, neutral/empathic expression, etc. If your child is small, you may be able to safely wrap him/her with your body or with a blanket to create equal pressure and calm. If you can safely hug your child, breathe deeply and calmly, and do so. If your child is bigger and you know therapeutic safety holds, use those. If you need help, call for it. Do not try to reason with your child until s/he has calmed. If certain things soothe your child, you might keep those things on hand to provide calm. If you are alone and cannot safely engage your child, remove yourself and other children to a safe distance. Calm your other children and process, as necessary. Let them know your aggressive child is struggling with big feelings and does not have a better way of showing them in the moment. If aggression is regular or harmful, you may be in a situation when outside help is necessary. You might need safety plans, medication management, and/or alternative living situations (e.g., is there a friend or family member with whom your child is comfortable and with whom she/he is less likely to become emotionally aroused? If so, could your child safely stay with that person part-time? If aggression is extreme, is a residential placement necessary for safety?)

I am happy to provide referrals for individual and/or group child, parent, and adult support. Many local providers are even offering free or reduced fee services. I can also try to help you find tutors, SLPs, OTs, and other providers. Please feel free to email me for help, or with any remaining questions. [jhalpern@wbma.cc](mailto:jhalpern@wbma.cc)

Thank you!