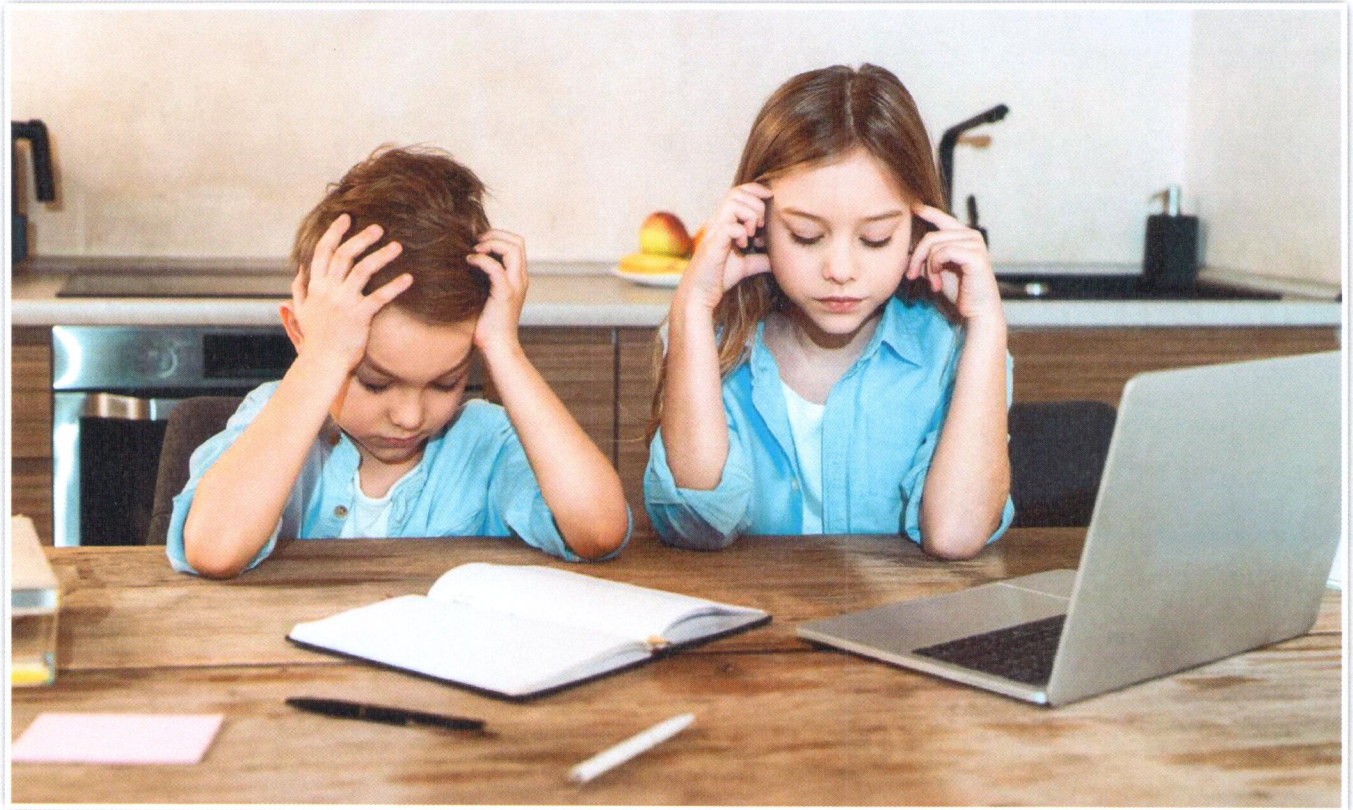


Digital Learning Survival Guide for Children with Autism

By Angela WEST



Whether we like it or not, 2021 is here, and with it, the continuation of virtual learning. In many locales, this mode has been the norm for some time. In other places, as the COVID-19 pandemic persists, schools continue to pivot between in-person, hybrid, and fully-virtual models. There are varying responses to this decision throughout the nation. Some families are outraged while others are relieved. Some teachers are satisfied, while others are disappointed. There's one thing that most agree on, though, and that's the fact that this learning environment poses extra challenges for atypical learners.

Just as autism is a spectrum, children diagnosed with autism will likely experience a spectrum of challenges in the era of virtual learning. One major issue is the disruption of routine. Children thrive on structure in

general and for children with autism, routines may help ground their day and bring a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Another concern is the loss of specialized support. When attending school in an in-person setting, an autistic child likely has an established network of supportive professionals, such as a speech therapist, occupational therapist, one-to-one aide, and various teachers in the classroom who provide individualized education. This team specializes in providing appropriate accommodations and modifications to ensure educational gains are achieved. In the blink of an eye, parents have been forced into the role of parent, teacher, and therapist. Now that their children are home, parents are scrambling to support them in the best way possible with minimal help from the people who specialize in these fields.



Breaking things up into smaller steps and then gradually increasing difficulty is a way of scaffolding information that can lead to small, yet significant successes.



Despite these challenges, as families and caregivers continue through the school year, there are a number of steps one can take to empower children diagnosed with autism and set them up for success.

1. Set up a designated workspace

Create a quiet, organized, distraction-free space for daily work.

2. Build confidence by establishing reasonable goals and benchmarks

Breaking things up into smaller steps and then gradually increasing difficulty is a way of scaffolding information that can lead to small, yet significant successes.

3. Make time for fun

Add an engaging, screen-free activity into the daily schedule such as a craft, music, outdoor free play, or a game that your child likes and can look forward to. Don't be afraid to incorporate movement breaks as needed.

4. Prioritize

Determine which skills are most important to achieve this semester or this year. Focus on the things your child needs most right now, academically, physically, developmentally, and emotionally.

5. Modify as needed

For some, especially children who have more significant challenges, full-time virtual learning may not be feasible right now. Sitting in a room all day partici-

pating in Zoom calls may not be possible or healthy for some children with autism.

If this is the case, have your child participate in sessions that are most beneficial or most enjoyable for them. This could mean speech therapy, art, or science, rather than all of the core subjects. If possible, stay in touch with your child's teacher and other advocates to determine the best plan.

6. Manage expectations – of yourself

Remember that you are not the teacher, but instead a learning support person. Do the best you can to help your child complete school tasks but do not expect the impossible, especially if you are also working. Your ability to maintain a positive emotional state will positively impact your child.

7. Provide opportunities for frequent praise and feedback.

Children learn best when desired behaviors are reinforced and maladaptive behaviors are not rewarded. Take some time to identify what your child values most (toys, stickers, books, etc) and set up simple rules such as "First let's join math class for 10 minutes, then we can read a book together." Verbal praise also goes a long way. Make sure to pair verbal praise and social reinforcement with tangible items by telling your child what they are doing well.

Online learning may not be a complete disaster for everyone, and some could even be well-suited to a virtual learning environment. Telehealth has been around for a number of years and many members of the autism community are seasoned users of online



Remember that you are not the teacher, but instead a learning support person.



learning platforms to deliver behavioral and speech therapy.

Don't be hesitant to utilize outside resources and ask for guidance when tackling the digital morass of online learning. While using new channels could be intimidating to those who are less tech-savvy, those with prior experience may feel more comfortable trying out new platforms and online tools. Some families might even be able to cherish the special things they can do together this year. Being at home could allow for more opportunities to engage in domestic activities like baking, playing games, creating art, trying out new toys or materials, setting new routines, and exercising. The ability to do these things as a family will be more limited for some, especially those who are working while taking care of their children and managing household tasks.

For most, 2021 will be about survival – physical and emotional. Children may not reach every academic goal this year. Parents may grow a few new grey hairs and gain or lose a few pounds. While our standards for education and parenting may change, it's essential that all families, especially those with children diagnosed with autism, provide an environment that is loving, supportive, and flexible.

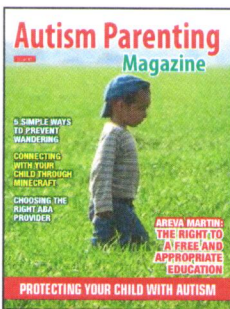
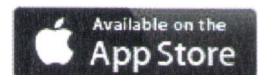


Angela West serves as Chief Clinical Officer of *Behavioral Framework*, a company serving autistic children in Maryland and Virginia through the latest science and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy techniques.

Angela is Board Certified and licensed as a Behavior Analyst in both Virginia and Maryland. She has a long history of developing and expanding ABA programs in both Maryland and Northern Virginia. Angela's devotion further led her to meet with key local and state government stakeholders and lobby on behalf of ABA Medicaid funders to ensure ABA treatment reaches all families.

She began her professional career as a crisis unit therapist for homeless adults diagnosed with Schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder. While attaining her master's degree at Loyola University, Angela worked with children diagnosed with severe psychological disorders at risk for juvenile detention placement. During this time, she saw a need to assist the underserved population of children in Northern Virginia diagnosed with autism. Angela simultaneously developed a small platform ABA program that grew to a diverse and multicultural team servicing hundreds of clients around NOVA. She went on to work as a consultant in Virginia to strengthen in-home ABA programs and create a solid foundation for these agencies to provide optimal care while developing teams of dedicated ABA therapists. With over 15 years of mental health and ABA experience, Angela has a diverse knowledge of programming and behavior management.

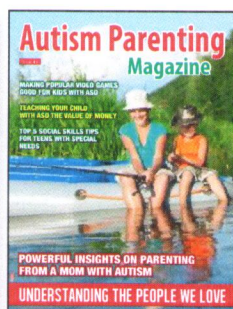
Autism Parenting Magazine



READ IT NOW



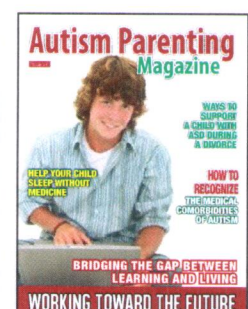
READ IT NOW



READ IT NOW



READ IT NOW



READ IT NOW