



AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN PRESENTS

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Help. Hope. Answers. Today



COVID-19

Reopening of Therapy Centers: Considerations for Families

May 18, 2020

As therapy centers re-open, parents and caregivers are trying to determine if it's safe for their child to resume face to face therapy. It's important to have as much information as possible to make the best decision for your child and family. ***You are the best advocate for your child. The decision to return to therapy is first and foremost, yours!*** Below are factors to consider.

Should my child resume face to face therapy right now?

Although many therapy centers are beginning to offer face to face services again, it may or may not be the right time for your child to resume therapy. The spread of COVID-19 has decreased, but it is still present in the community and the potential for infection remains a significant concern among public health officials. You may want to consider the following factors as you make your decision;

- ***How feasible is it that your child will be able to understand and comply with the precautions*** listed below? For example;
 - Does your child have a lot of sensory seeking behaviors (i.e. touching things, putting things in their mouth)?
 - Face masks are recommended for all children over two years of age. If your child won't wear a face mask, your behavior therapist maybe able to work with your child to increase tolerance and compliance.
 - Can you child tolerate frequent handwashing or use of hand sanitizer?

cont.





- Does your child understand physical distancing/maintaining 6 foot distance from therapy/clinical staff?
- Has your *child experienced significant regression or problematic behavior* without face to face services?
- Could your child *benefit from or continue to benefit from telehealth* services right now?
- Would your child benefit from a *combination of telehealth and face to therapy*? This option would reduce the risk of infection by limiting the number of face to face therapy sessions.
- Do you, your child or other individuals living in your home have any *medical conditions that increase the risk* of severe illness or hospitalization if they contract COVID-19? Based on currently available information and clinical expertise, **older adults** and **people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions** might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Based on what we know now, those at high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19 are:
 - [People aged 65 years and older](#)
 - People who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility
 - People of all ages with underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled, including:
 - People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - People who have serious heart conditions
 - People who are immunocompromised
 - Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications
 - People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] ≥ 40)
 - People with diabetes
 - People with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis
 - People with liver disease
 - *Individuals with disabilities are not a high-risk category in themselves, but those with disabilities who have other medical conditions may be*

cont.





Specific Considerations for Children;

- Some children do not present with typical symptoms of COVID-19. The CDC is working with state and local health departments to investigate reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) associated with COVID-19 and gather more information as quickly as possible about how common it is and who is at risk. MIS-C has been described as inflammation (swelling) across multiple body systems, potentially including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes, and gastrointestinal organs. Signs and symptoms of MIS-C include fever and various symptoms such as abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, neck pain, rash, and feeling tired.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

What is your provider's current plan to minimize risk of infection?

Your provider should be aware of local and state public health recommendations regarding COVID-19 prevention. ***Ask about the plan*** your provider has for implementing and monitoring safe practices, for staying up to date about changes to current recommendations, and ***how management will assure all precautions are being consistently and comprehensively implemented*** across the facility or in the home. Some safe practices include, but may not be limited to;

- Daily screening for staff, children, and caregiver
 - Remember, although daily screening, including temperature taking, can be helpful in preventing the spread of infection, it may provide a false sense of security. People who have COVID-19 can be contagious for fourteen days before developing any symptoms.
- Social distancing strategies
- Curb side drop off and pick up
- Closed or limited use of lobby/waiting room
- One child per therapist only
- Use of same therapy room
- Handwashing
- Disinfecting and cleaning of the facility
- Access to and correct use of appropriate PPE

cont.





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Social Stories as a Means to Teach Mask Wearing

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As everyone knows by now, wearing face masks is one of our many new norms. It's hard to go into a public place such as a grocery store and find someone who is NOT wearing a mask. In our changed world, not wearing a face mask means decreased opportunities for social interaction.

While face masks might be bothersome, the majority of us can deal with our discomfort and still wear them for the common good. Unfortunately, what many might define as bothersome or uncomfortable can be described as intolerable by individuals with Autism. Sensory issues such as not being able to tolerate the feel of something on your face, or the anxiety that results from something new like wearing a mask, are just a few of the reasons people with Autism have difficulty wearing them.

There are, however, things we can do to increase the likelihood that people with Autism will wear face masks. Social Stories were created by Carol Gray to help individuals with Autism understand social situations, expectations, social cues, new activities, and/or social rules. As the name implies, they are brief descriptive stories that provide accurate information about a social situation. These individualized stories clarify social expectations using visuals and specific sentence structures. Knowing what to expect by using a Social Story can help individuals with ASD successfully tolerate new situations such as wearing a face mask.

There are three types of sentences that should be used when creating a Social Story: descriptive, perspective and directive sentences. Descriptive sentences define anticipated events where a situation occurs, who is involved, what they are doing, and why. Perspective sentences describe the internal status of the person or persons involved and directive sentences are individualized statements of desired responses stated in a positive manner.

cont.





They may begin with “I can try...” or “I will work on...”. Below is a sample Social Story about wearing a mask in public using the types of sentences listed above.

When I go to the store, I see people shopping with masks on (descriptive). They are wearing masks to help stop the spread of COVID-19 (descriptive). COVID – 19 is an illness that can make people very sick (descriptive). Wearing a mask can help protect people from getting COVID-19 (descriptive). I do not like seeing people wearing masks (perspective). It makes me feel scared (perspective). I do not like the feeling of a mask on my face. (perspective). It is uncomfortable (perspective). I will practice wearing my mask for a few minutes each day (directive). The more I practice wearing a mask, the easier it will be to wear (directive). I can practice taking deep breaths before I put my face mask on, and this will help me feel relaxed (directive).

A Social Story should have a ratio of 3 to 5 descriptive and perspective sentences for each directive sentence. Avoid using too many directive sentences; they will be lost without adequate contextualization. Write in first person and on the individual’s developmental level. Stories should include pictures or other visuals that fit within this developmental level to supplement text.

New social norms will be unfolding over the next few months. We are all striving to adapt to a changed world with new and different rules for social engagement. Social Stories can be used not only to help our loved ones with Autism wear masks but to help maximize their participation in a variety of social situations.

Staying Social During Social Distancing

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If the past few months have taught us anything, it’s that socializing is very difficult during a time of social distancing. We know, though, that children need exposure to other humans in order to maintain their social communication skills. What are some ways that you can squeeze some person-to-person interaction into your day during this time? See if any of these would work for you!

cont.





Zoom with a Purpose

Many times, Zoom interactions aren't as successful as we hoped they'd be, both for us as adults and for our kids. Don't give up yet! Instead, try setting a purpose or a theme for the Zoom calls. For example, if your child is going to chat with one of their friends from school, try having them both come with pictures of what they ate that day or their favorite outdoor activity. If your child is talking to their grandparents, try having a "show-and-tell" and each bring a themed item (favorite hat, favorite book, etc.). Shared experiences provide an easier context in which to communicate. Plus, (virtual) face-to-face interactions not only help to facilitate basic greeting and question/answer skills, but also conversational strategies as a whole.

Walking - a Social Opportunity

While taking a family walk remains somewhat solitary, there are a number of ways to address social communication during this time. I've been thoroughly impressed by art in peoples' windows and on their sidewalks in the neighborhoods around me. For social communication practice, have your child create their own art to put in the window with greetings and words encouragement. If you have friendly and cooperative neighbors, perhaps pick a time when you know you'll be out and about and ask them to sit on their porches as you walk by. This will give your child some partners with whom they can practice greetings and basic conversational skills (from a distance).

Letter Writing

Who doesn't love getting mail, especially from a loved one? If your child is a writer, work with them to write notes to those you are unable to see right now. If your child is not a writer or is a pre-writer, you can talk through what you could write in a letter or a card. Letter writing has its own set of social rules and formats, so practicing in this way will help keep those social skills sharp.

Cooking with Friends

I'm a big fan of using cooking as a language and learning strategy for a lot of reasons. First, we have to do it everyday, which makes it functional. Second, it is extremely engaging most of the time. If you have a child who likes to cook, turn it into a social event. Instead of the cooking being just you and your child, have siblings or other adults in the house join in as well to turn it into a party. Cooking is also a great activity to use for a "Zoom with purpose." Have grandma or an uncle or a friend join in over whatever platform you use and cook the same dish together. By utilizing this activity in a social way, you can practice turn-taking, questions and answers, and polite forms (please, thank you, etc.).

Identifying Emotions

Part of being a social communicator is recognizing emotions in others.

cont.





While we are not able to see other people right now, there are many opportunities to identify emotions. As you watch a television show together, talk about the different facial expressions of the characters and what they might be feeling. You can also pause while reading a book together and talk about the characters' emotions. The best part about this - you don't need a separate activity to address it.

Overall, there are a number of different ways to include social communication into your day despite social distancing. It might take a bit of preparation, but with some time (and perhaps patience and flexibility), these activities can truly enrich your child's social skills.



This year's Autism Hero Walk has gone virtual in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Register your fundraising team today at www.AAoMWalk.com and then join us on the [Autism Hero Walk: Virtual Edition Facebook group](#) for six weeks of interactive content that will accomplish three major goals:

1. Celebrate your hero with autism
2. Raise funds to support the work of Autism Alliance of Michigan
3. Spread awareness and education about autism

On **July 26th, 2020**, we will wear our green superhero shirts and walk united, in the safety of our own neighborhoods. This "closing ceremony" will mark the conclusion of an epic six weeks of awareness and unity.

