

Supporting children with disabilities at home during COVID-19

**A resource pack
for parents and
caregivers**

Supporting children with disabilities at home during COVID-19: A resource pack for parents and caregivers

The COVID-19 outbreak has had an impact on how people live their lives in every country around the world. In this context it is very important that the specific needs of children with disabilities are taken into account. This resource pack provides advice and guidance for parents and caregivers on how best to protect and support their children with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Contents

- Section 1: General guidance for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities 3**
 - 1.1 General advice..... 3
 - 1.2 The importance of talking 4

- Section 2: Supporting children with disabilities to learn at home during the COVID-19 outbreak5**
 - 2.1 Parents and caregivers: Take charge of your child’s education!..... 5
 - 2.2 Identify how your child learns best..... 5
 - 2.3 Talk to your child about life success rather than school success..... 8

- Section 3: Safeguarding during COVID-19 10**
 - 3.1 Safeguarding children with disabilities 10
 - 3.2 The risk of abuse and gender-based violence 10
 - 3.3 Key messages to prevent violence and abuse..... 11

- Section 4: Communication and access to information for persons with disabilities during COVID-19..... 13**
 - 4.1 General information about accessibility during COVID-19..... 13
 - 4.2 Barriers to hand washing for persons with disabilities 13
 - 4.3 Communicating with persons with hearing impairments 14
 - 4.4 Communicating with persons with visual impairments..... 15
 - 4.5 Communicating with persons with intellectual disabilities 15

- Section 5: Useful resources 17**

- References..... 19**

Section 1: General guidance for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities

1.1 General advice

- Adhere to all the same rules and practices provided by the Ministry of Health for your child with disabilities that you would for other children.
- Be sure to explain, in whatever way is most appropriate for your child, how they should wash their hands. If they cannot wash their hands by themselves, support them to do so.
- Certain disabilities make children more vulnerable to COVID-19. Extra precautions should be taken to protect them. If anyone in your family is showing signs of being unwell with COVID-19 symptoms, immediately move them into an isolated room and seek medical advice.
- Have a plan in place in case you or a family member becomes unwell. Make sure that you have identified a person who will take care of your child in the event that you cannot.
- Be aware that your child might require continued health services during this time. Be sure to discuss this and create a plan with your healthcare provider.
- Have the names and numbers of members of your support network printed and accessible in case you need to reach them – such as a Community Health Volunteer, Chief, Child Protection Volunteer, Psychosocial Volunteer or Children’s Officer.
- This can be a very emotional time for everyone but especially parents of children with disabilities. Make sure that you have someone to speak to or ask for help. Do not hesitate to reach out to a family member, friend or community support person if you need to talk or if you need a temporary break from caregiving.
- Your child might be feeling anxious but may not be able to express it. Be attentive to their reactions, moods or emotional behavior. Try to reassure and calm them. Be extra patient with them.
- If you are part of a network of parents of children with disabilities, keep in touch with them via phone or WhatsApp. You can provide support to one another.
- Do not permit your child to play outside with other children. Instead, find creative and appropriate ways to engage your child, to his or her ability, in indoor games, learning and play activities to keep them occupied. Create time to play, read, pray or sing together as a family. This will help put them at ease.

1.2 The importance of talking

Be willing to talk about COVID-19. Your young child is curious and attentive. They will already have heard something. Silence and secrets do not protect our children. Honesty and openness do. Think about how much they will understand. You know them best.

Your child may ask (many) questions. Answer these questions sincerely and truthfully. And even if your child does not ask questions or is too young to ask questions, you will notice that he or she is still curious about the changes happening in their world (and your response to it).

There are a lot of stories going around. Some may not be true. Make sure you know the facts and give your child accurate information about COVID-19.

Be open and listen. Allow your child to talk freely. Ask them open questions and find out how much they already know.

Be honest. Always answer their questions truthfully. Think about how old your child is and how much they can understand. Discuss the issues simply and in a calm manner. Remember young children often understand complicated issues better if we explain them in a concrete manner.

It is OK not to know the answers. It is fine to say: “We don’t know, but we are working on it”; or “We don’t know, but we think...”. Use this as an opportunity to learn something new with your child!

Be supportive. Your child may be scared or confused. Give them space to share how they are feeling and let them know you are there for them.

Explain that COVID-19 has nothing to do with the way someone looks, where they are from, or what language they speak. Tell your child that we can be compassionate to people who are sick and those who are caring for them. Look for stories of people who are working to stop the outbreak and are caring for sick people.

Remember children are good at imitating. Therefore, do as you say and put in practice what you have told them.

End on a good note. Check to see if your child is okay. Remind them that you care and that they can talk to you anytime. Then do something fun together!

Section 2: Supporting children with disabilities to learn at home during the COVID-19 outbreak

Over the years, the benefits of providing an inclusive education to all children, disabled as well as non-disabled, have been shown. During COVID-19, and particularly while schools are closed, it is very important that all children, especially children with disabilities, are supported to continue with their learning. In this section we provide guidance for parents of children with disabilities on how you can best support your child with disabilities to learn at home.

2.1 Parents and caregivers: Take charge of your child's education!

DON'T sit back and let someone else be responsible for providing your child with the tools they need to learn. You can and should take an active role in your child's education, especially while lessons in schools are suspended.

2.2 Identify how your child learns best

Everyone, whether disabled or not, has their own **unique learning style**. Some people learn best by seeing or reading, others by listening, and others by doing.

You can help support your child by knowing their primary learning style and adapting activities to suit this. Is your child a visual learner, an auditory learner, or a kinesthetic learner (that is learning through movement)? Once you've figured out how they learn best, you can take steps to support them. Usually a combination of these styles may work better.

Where possible this information can be obtained from your children's teachers, although it may not be easy to contact them due to COVID-19 restrictions. But remember some teachers may not assess this accurately. You as parent should know your child best. It is important to be supportive and flexible in your approach.

Is your child a visual learner?

If your child is a visual learner, they:

- Learn best by seeing or reading
- Do well when material is presented and tested visually, not verbally
- Benefit from written notes, directions, diagrams, charts, maps, and pictures
- May love to draw, read, and write; are probably a good speller

Tips:

- Use books, videos, computers, visual aids and flashcards
- Make detailed, colour-coded or highlighted notes
- Make outlines, diagrams, and lists
- Use drawings and illustrations (preferably in colour)
- Take detailed notes

Is your child an auditory learner?

If your child is an auditory learner, they:

- Learn best by listening
- Do well in lecture-based learning environments and on oral reports and tests
- Benefit from classroom discussions, spoken directions and study groups
- May love music, languages, and being on stage

Tips:

- Read notes or study materials out loud
- Use word associations and verbal repetition to memorise
- Study with other siblings. Talk things through
- Listen to books on tape or other audio recordings
- Use a tape recorder to listen to 'lectures' again later

Is your child a kinesthetic learner?

If your child is a kinesthetic learner, they:

- Learn best by doing and moving
- Do well when they can move, touch, explore, and create in order to learn
- Benefit from hands-on activities, lab classes, props, skits, and field trips
- May love sports, drama, dance, martial arts, and arts and crafts

Tips:

- Get hands on. Do experiments
- Use activity-based study tools, like role-playing or model building
- Study with siblings and take frequent breaks
- Use memory games and flash cards
- Study with music on in the background

Engaging children with disabilities in learning: a practical example

Children who are blind often learn best through tactile shapes and objects. Here is an example of how an adult educator used a bowl of bottle tops to support a blind child to engage in learning together with other children.



At the beginning, when the other children saw the bowl they said: “Oh, I wonder how many bottle tops there are?” One of the children placed the bowl in the middle of the group and said to the blind learner: “Hey, touch, feel how many bottle tops!”

The adult responded to the group: “Yes... I also wonder how many bottle tops there are ... what do you think?” The children started to guess: 43? 79? 135?

Then the adult moved on: “How could you find out the number of the bottle tops?” One of the children knew that they would need to count. The adult left the group, and the children started to count. They first started to line up the bottle tops in long rows and then count. All the children were very much engaged in the activity but they realised that they got messed up with the figures and didn’t reach an agreement about the number of the bottle tops. Then the blind child suggested that if they grouped the bottle tops in tens, it would be easier to count.

They did this, and when the adult came back to the group, they had their answer ready. The adult asked them to explain how they had come to their conclusion, and the children took turns to describe their steps. They were proud to say that it was the blind child who gave them the tip to get to their end result.¹

This example shows that by supporting a child with a disability to be included in the activity by making the materials accessible, he or she will often be the first with a solution.

¹ Väyrynen, Sai (2003) Observations from South African Classrooms: Some Inclusive Strategies. Scope Project

2.3 Talk to your child about life success rather than school success

Success means different things to different people, but your hopes and dreams for your child probably extend beyond good report cards. Maybe you hope that your child's future includes a fulfilling job and satisfying relationships, for example, or a happy family and a sense of contentment.

The point is that success in life – rather than just school success – depends, not on academics, but on things like a healthy sense of self, the willingness to ask for and accept help, the determination to keep trying in spite of challenges, and the ability to form healthy relationships with others. There are several other qualities that aren't as easy to quantify as grades and exam scores. Some of these qualities are considered below. You can use the material in this section to help you talk to your child about what's important in life. Encourage them to think about their hopes for the future, and help them to feel valued and supported.

Self-awareness and self-confidence

For children with disabilities, self-awareness (knowledge about strengths, weaknesses, and special talents) and self-confidence are very important. Struggles in the classroom can cause children to doubt their abilities and question their strengths.

Being proactive

A proactive person is able to make decisions and take action to resolve problems or achieve goals. For people with disabilities, important aspects of being proactive include self-advocacy (for example, asking for a seat at the front of the classroom) and the willingness to take responsibility for your own choices.

Perseverance

Perseverance is the drive to keep going despite challenges and failures, and the flexibility to change plans if things aren't working. Children (or adults) with disabilities may need to work harder and longer at some things because of their disability.

The ability to set goals

The ability to set realistic and attainable goals is a vital skill for life success. It also involves the flexibility to adapt and adjust goals according to changing circumstances, limitations, or challenges.

Knowing how and when to ask for help

Strong support systems are key for people with disabilities. Successful people are able to ask for help when they need it and reach out to others for support.

- Help your child nurture and develop good relationships. Model what it means to be a good friend and relative, so your child knows what it means to help and support others.
- Demonstrate to your child how to ask for help in family situations.
- Share examples of people needing help, how they got it, and why it was good to ask for help. Present your child with role-play scenarios that might require help.

The ability to handle stress

If children with disabilities learn how to regulate stress and calm themselves, they will be much better equipped to overcome challenges.

- Use words to identify feelings and help your child learn to recognise specific feelings.
- Ask your child the words they would use to describe stress. Does your child recognise when they are feeling stressed?
- Encourage your child to identify and participate in activities that help reduce stress like sports, games, music, or writing in a journal.
- Ask your child to describe activities and situations that make them feel stressed. Break down the scenarios and talk about how overwhelming feelings of stress and frustration might be avoided.²

² Gina Kemp, M.A., Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D (2019): Helping Children with Learning Disabilities, www.helpguide.org/articles/autism-learning-disabilities/helping-children-with-learning-disabilities.htm

Section 3: Safeguarding during COVID-19

Every child has the right to be protected from violence. At difficult times, like the COVID-19 outbreak, this becomes even more important. If you know of a child being abused or you are being abused, tell someone. If you have access to a phone, call the police.

3.1 Safeguarding children with disabilities

- Ask for help if you feel that you are unsafe, or your children are in danger. However, do not place children into a charitable institution for children. Contact a Chief, Child Protection Volunteer, Psychosocial Volunteer or a Children's Officer if you are worried about caring for your child.
- Know where to seek help if needed. Make sure you have the contact information of your community leaders such as the Chief or Child Protection Volunteer.
- Being inside the house with children all day can be stressful. However, be mindful of your own behaviour. Step away, take a deep breath and give yourself a few moments to calm down if you get tense or feel angry. Never use violence against children.
- Model behaviours you would like to see in your children. When necessary, teach children right from wrong with calm words without resorting to harsh discipline methods.
- If you have to leave the home for work or for an extended period of time, be sure that your child(ren) are cared for by a trusted adult. When you come home you must wash your hands and change your clothes before engaging with your family.
- As children continue to spend time at home during COVID-19 they will live more of their lives online. This makes them more vulnerable to online bullying, abuse and exploitation. Don't let COVID-19 increase violence. Limit the time your child is online. Supervise their online activity by keeping the devices your child uses in communal areas of the house such as in the living room or kitchen where an adult is able to supervise. Children should not access the internet unsupervised in private spaces, such as alone in a bedroom or bathroom.

3.2 The risk of abuse and gender-based violence

COVID-19, like any crisis, has an impact on gender norms, and is likely to increase gender-based violence. Although this section primarily focuses on the increased risk to adolescent girls and young women, it is important to be aware that violence against men and boys exists and may also be increased.

There are several reasons why the COVID-19 outbreak could potentially lead to an increase in violence, particularly against women and girls, including:

- As livelihoods are affected, intimate partner violence may increase.
- Self-isolation may increase the psychological impacts of violence as well as the severity and frequency of the violence taking place – as survivors may have to be placed in quarantine with a perpetrator.
- Violence and other forms of child abuse may increase at the family level.
- The closure of schools, and other issues surrounding COVID-19 which may have a negative economic impact, may increase the likelihood of survival sex, transactional sex and risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in the community.
- With an increase in the need to collect water and fuel, which is often a role performed by women and adolescent girls, there is likely to be an increase in the number of trips and subsequent increased risk of violence.

3.3 Key messages to prevent violence and abuse

The current situation has put additional stress on families. Loss of income, closure of schools and fear of getting sick can all lead to an extraordinary amount of fear, frustration and anger. However, during these times, it is especially important that as adults, we manage our emotions and take active steps to control our reactions:

- Violence is never ok. Even when we are facing stress and pressure, it is not appropriate to take this out in a violent manner on any adult or any child. Ever!
- If you feel you are losing your temper, remove yourself from the situation – even if it is hard to do so in a small shared space. If you feel that you are going to get angry with someone else walk away. If possible, go outside, listen to music, pray or do something to calm yourself down.
- If you feel that you cannot calm down or fear that you will be violent to another adult or child, call someone for help. Ask a Chief, religious leader, Child Protection Volunteer or a trusted relative or friend.
- To try and avoid stress, anger or frustration during this difficult time, talk about things as a family. Create routines, house rules and find solutions that will enable all of you to feel safe and get through this crisis.
- These are very difficult times, but every adult and child has the right to be protected from violence. Being required to stay home does NOT mean that you cannot seek urgent help, advice or support if you are being abused.

Parents need to be aware of the environments and the risks of abuse that children and particularly girls with disabilities face. It should be noted that all cases of abuse should

be reported immediately to the police. The child should be taken to the nearest government health centre for a proper medical assessment.

Section 4: Communication and access to information for persons with disabilities during COVID-19

Persons with disabilities are more vulnerable to and may be more likely to contract COVID-19. It is therefore essential that they receive accurate information that is well communicated and is in a format that is accessible for them.

It is important that barriers of prejudice, infrastructure, and inaccessible formats do not prevent persons with disabilities obtaining and using information in daily life. While there may be laws in place about providing information in accessible formats such as braille, audio formats or sign language, in many countries these are not effectively implemented.

4.1 General information about accessibility during COVID-19

- In all societies, people use information in many forms to make decisions about their daily lives. Accessibility is about giving equal access to everyone, including providing vital information in a way that everyone is able to access and understand.
- Accessible communication can range from actions such as being able to read price tags, to physically participating in meetings, to reading a pamphlet with health care information, to understanding current social issues affecting communities.
- It is important to make sure that information on issues affecting people's lives, such as information about COVID-19, is communicated to persons with disabilities in accessible formats.
- During a crisis like COVID-19, messages are often passed to the masses verbally or through the radio. There is a risk that many persons with disabilities will not receive this information.
- It is vital that everyone is aware of the importance of being able to access information about how we can protect ourselves and others from COVID-19. Persons with disabilities should be kept informed and should not be left out.

4.2 Barriers to hand washing for persons with disabilities

Hand washing facilities may not be accessible for persons with disabilities for several reasons. These include physical inaccessibility and difficulties in accessing information about facilities and the correct procedures. Therefore:

- Hand washing facilities should be placed at a level where people using wheelchairs can reach.
- Hand washing facilities should be accessible without having to use steps. Ramps should be installed where necessary.

- If persons with disabilities need additional support to use hand washing facilities then this should be provided.
- Use alternative forms of communication such as sign language, facial expressions and signs to make sure that persons with hearing impairments understand hand washing processes.
- Persons with visual impairments may need a verbal explanation of how they should wash their hands.
- Persons with learning difficulties may require additional support to understand how they can protect themselves from COVID-19. Family members should teach them the skills they need, such as how to wash their hands, in small steps until they have a full understanding. Continuous support and monitoring will be important.
- Persons with learning difficulties often face a great deal of stigma and discrimination, and are more likely to be left out in the fight against COVID-19.

4.3 Communicating with persons with hearing impairments

When a person has a hearing impairment, they may not be able to hear some or all of what you are saying to them and the sounds around them. The following points are therefore important to bear in mind when communicating with someone with a hearing impairment:

- When you are talking to someone with a hearing impairment, face them directly, on the same level and in good light whenever possible. This will help if they are relying on visual cues such as lip reading, gestures or facial expressions.
- If someone is using a sign language interpreter, make sure you direct your speech at the person, not at their interpreter.
- Not being able to see you will affect communication – therefore avoid talking from another room.
- Speak clearly, slowly, distinctly and naturally, without shouting or exaggerating your mouth movements.
- When you first start talking to them, say the person's name. This will give them a chance to focus attention, and reduces the chance of missing words at the beginning of the conversation.
- Avoid talking too rapidly or using sentences that are too complex. As you speak, slow down a little, pause between sentences and wait to make sure you have been understood.

- Keep your hands away from your face while you are talking as this will make you harder to understand.
- When explaining important information about COVID-19, think about using non-verbal forms of communication, such as providing diagrams of how to wash your hands.

4.4 Communicating with persons with visual impairments

Having a visual impairment can affect how you communicate with others. We observe our partners to see if they 'get' what we are saying. When you talk to someone with a visual impairment, think about the visual clues you may look for during a conversation, like facial expressions or gestures. Some visual cues indicate mood or emotions. Remember also that having a visual impairment does not always mean total absence of vision.

The following points are important to bear in mind when communicating with someone with a visual impairment:

1. At the beginning of every conversation, it's a good idea to gain the person's attention by speaking first and/or by a gentle touch in the arm.
2. Inform the person of who you are. If they have someone with them to support them, make sure you direct your speech to the person, not their companion.
3. In group conversations, always make it clear who you are speaking to. Make sure you use verbal responses, avoiding gestures like nods and head shakes.
4. If you are demonstrating actions such as washing hands or keeping a safe distance during COVID-19, make sure you give clear verbal instructions. Ask them if they need any additional support and guidance.
5. You can also engage other senses such as touch and smell when explaining things like accessing soap or sterilisers. This may be particularly helpful if the person also has a learning disability.
6. Remember that written information can be provided in an alternative way such as large print or braille. Ask them what format would be most helpful for them.

4.5 Communicating with persons with intellectual disabilities

When you are communicating with a person with an intellectual disability it is important that you talk to them with respect and a positive attitude. You may experience some difficulties with communication, but if you take the time to understand the best way to communicate with them then you will be off to a good start. Remember that they experience the full range of emotions just like any other person.

It is important that family members of persons with intellectual disabilities are aware of how to support and monitor them on a daily basis. They may need support with maintaining their hygiene and other actions needed to protect them against COVID-19 as they may not be able to do this independently.

The following points are important to bear in mind when communicating with someone with an intellectual disability:

- Show respect and kindness to all people at all times, regardless of their ability.
- Avoid any disrespectful language or name calling.
- Make sure that the body language you use does not come across as defensive, such as crossed arms and legs.
- Be kind and open when communicating with a person with an intellectual disability. Their disability does not stop them from forming strong emotional connections.
- Speak directly to the person and not whoever is accompanying them. Never talk about someone as if they are not in the room.
- Speak with your normal speech pattern – do not speak more loudly or slowly.
- Take your lead from them – match your vocabulary to the way they speak. If they use simple words or phrases then think about doing the same. However, be careful that you do not ‘mimic’ the way a person speaks or they may feel insulted.
- Do not treat an adult or older child with an intellectual disability as though they are a young child.
- Where appropriate, think about using alternative communication methods such as sign language or simplified signing or hand gestures.

Section 5: Useful resources

Follow the hyperlinks to find a range of useful resources for families with children with disabilities. Please note that Leonard Cheshire cannot be held responsible for external content.

General advice on COVID-19

A [guide](#) (pdf) to engaging with children and adults with disabilities on COVID-19 from UNICEF.

The latest COVID-19 news and resources, as well as tips to protect you and your family from [UNICEF](#).

A new [fictional book](#) developed by and for children aims to help families understand and cope with COVID-19.

Teaching resources for home-learning

A [list of educational applications](#), platforms and resources to help parents, teachers, schools facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction.

See [here](#) for a **general** guide to **Inclusive Digital learning**, includes links to all the best online learning resources out there, with a focus on children with disabilities. This [guide](#) is specifically for teachers who are supporting children with disabilities. (INEE)

See [here](#) for a range of resources for **families and children** to learn from home (from EENET and NAD).

Key [tips and learning resources](#) from Aga Khan Foundation.

[Online courses for parents and teachers](#) (from Down Syndrome Education International)

Supporting children to [learn through day-to-day activities](#) (Down Syndrome Association, UK)

[Top ten tips to support children with Down Syndrome at home](#) (from Prof R Farragher, University of Queensland)

Mental health and wellbeing

[Resources and tools](#) for mental health and psychosocial support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Better Care Network).

[Resources](#) to help children and youth understand the pandemic, work through anxiety, and get help for any existing or emerging concerns.

Combating social isolation through [photography and community](#)

Students out of school share their [experiences](#) of keeping their mood up.

Child protection

[Tools and resources](#) for child protection in the COVID-19 pandemic (Better Care Network).

Advocacy

[Planipolis](#) is a portal of national education plans and policies and key education frameworks and monitoring reports.

Inspired by young people, [a set of actions anyone can take](#), to help fight against misinformation and stigma, and to promote community support.

Advice for employers for supporting working parents

[Family-friendly policies](#) and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19: Key steps employers can take (UNICEF).

Supporting children who are migrating

This [blog](#) provides research insights on how to support children who are migrating from their home, either alone or with their family in East Africa.

Longer reports investigating impact of COVID-19

This [report](#) outlines key human rights risks to children related to the COVID-19 crisis, and steps that governments should take to protect children's rights in the pandemic, including education (Human Rights Watch).

References

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Girls' Education Challenge (2020): **Safeguarding and COVID-19: Guidance Note for Projects**

International Disability Alliance (IDA) (2020): **Protecting Persons with Disabilities Against COVID-19**

Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Kenya – Office of The Principal Secretary (April 2020): **Preventing and Responding to COVID-19: Key messages to support those working with vulnerable children and families in Kenya**

New Brunswick Association for Community Living: **Inclusive Education and its Benefits**, nbacl.nb.ca/module-pages/inclusive-education-and-its-benefits/

UNICEF, Save the Children and Zero to Three (2020): **COVID-19 Parenting 6: Talking about COVID-19**

UNICEF, WHO, IFRC (2020): **Interim Guidance for COVID-19: Prevention and Control in Schools**

Womens' Refugee Commission and Child Fund (2016): **Gender Based Violence Against Children and Youth with Disabilities: A Toolkit for Child Protection**, www.womensrefugeecommission.org/populations/disabilities/research-and-resources/document/download/1289