



## Talking about COVID-19 with People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD)

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With so much information out there about coronavirus (COVID-19), it can be overwhelming and difficult to understand the pandemic and how to stay safe. It can be particularly difficult for caregivers to explain to people with I/DD what is happening and why. Nevertheless, explaining the COVID-19 situation to people with I/DD increases their understanding and decreases their confusion, both of which are important to maintaining their mental health.

Here are some tips to help family members and caregivers of people with I/DD to concretely share information about the virus and what everyone can do to stay healthy and safe.

- **Consider each person's feelings.** A pandemic is a traumatic event, and what might seem like an 'over-reaction' to some is a difficult reality for others. People react and cope in their own ways. Trainings on trauma-related topics are available at <https://paautism.org/elearning/>.
- **Talk about it.** Be available for questions, and take time answering them. For individuals with communication barriers, consider using communication boards to help them express their feelings about the current situation. For more information:  
<https://www.talktometechnologies.com/pages/covid-19>  
[https://www.talktometechnologies.com/pages/communication-boards-free-download?mc\\_cid=1add4bb68f&mc\\_eid=28f5729de0](https://www.talktometechnologies.com/pages/communication-boards-free-download?mc_cid=1add4bb68f&mc_eid=28f5729de0) ;  
<https://www.talktometechnologies.com/>.
- **Be okay with not having all the answers about COVID-19.** Let people know their questions matter. If you do not have answers, offer to find the answers and get back to them as soon as possible; or, offer to work with them to find the answers. Gather the information from trusted organizations, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, hospitals, universities, etc.
- **Be aware of body language and facial expressions when talking.** Your words communicate a message; if your body language communicates a different message, it can cause confusion, distrust, and fear.
- **Share experiences.** Knowing that others are dealing with similar feelings can ease a one's worry and fears. For details on how to help someone manage anxiety and/or depression, visit <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2020/03/how-to-help-someone-with-anxiety-or-depression-during-covid-19/>
- **Keep communication concrete.** A resource written by self-advocates can be found at <https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plain-Language-Information-on-Coronavirus.pdf>. Here are some other examples for ways to talk about the virus:
  - **Explain what COVID-19 is physically, what it means.**  
COVID-19 is a virus that is new to people. It is very contagious – people can get it if they breathe it in, or if they touch their faces when the virus is on their hands.

- **Explain how you might feel if you get it.**

A list of the symptoms of COVID-19 is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>

- People who have had it say that they had a fever, a dry cough, and sometimes had a harder time with their breathing. Some people say the symptoms are similar to the flu.
- Many people who get the virus have mild symptoms. Mild means not strong, like mild salsa is not spicy.
- Some people who get the virus experience strong, or severe, symptoms. This happens mostly to people who elderly and people have other health problems.

- **Explain what is happening right now, or what they might see.**

- COVID-19 has made people sick all over the world.
- Many people are wearing masks and gloves. They are trying not to spread the virus to other people (if they have it), or trying not to get it themselves from others.
- Some people might act as if they do not know about the COVID-19 pandemic or as if it is no a big deal to them. It is always best to be safe and follow what the experts tell us to do.

- **Explain what to do to stay healthy and to help others stay healthy.**

- Wash your hands often, for at least 20 seconds each time. Sing the “ABC” song or the “Happy Birthday” song to make sure you are washing long enough. Get a handwashing poster here: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/wash-your-hands-poster-english-508.pdf>
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow, not your hand. Get a poster about covering your cough here: [https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/protect/cdc\\_cough.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/protect/cdc_cough.pdf)
- Try to keep your hands away from your nose, mouth, and eyes. These are places where the virus can get into your body.
- Use social distancing to stop the virus from spreading to you and others. Social distancing means to stay away from busy places and to stand at least 6 feet away from other people.
- For more information, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html>.

- **Explain what to do if you feel sick.**

- Tell someone (a family member or caregiver) if you feel sick so they can get what you need to feel better.

## Communicating about COVID-19 through Social Stories®

Social Stories® are useful tools for communicating concretely with people who have autism. They can be helpful now, during the confusion and uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis. Links to social stories® developed by ASERT (Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training) are provided below.

- What is Coronavirus? <https://paautism.org/resource/coronavirus-social-story/>
- Handwashing - <https://paautism.org/resource/hand-washing-social-story/>
- Social Distancing - <https://paautism.org/resource/social-distancing-social-story/>
- Isolation - <https://paautism.org/resource/isolation-social-story/>

### Resources

Just For Kids: A Comic Exploring The New Coronavirus. (2020, February 28). Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Health and Safety Guide. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://pautism.org/resource/coronavirus-resources/>