

# How to Support Parents With Children at Home During the Pandemic

## part one: The Importance of Involving Children in Chores

Autistic children being guests in their own homes is a common theme. Consider the following comments made by parents:

“Oh, no he is only 10 he does not need to learn to make his bed.”

“I don’t know if he (a 15 year old) can wash a dish, I never asked him to.”

“Yes, John can do some things for himself but he has never done anything to help someone else unless specifically asked.”

“I don’t expect him to clear the table, he has apraxia.”

“She gets upset if she comes into the kitchen and the food is not on the table.”

“He (a 16 year old) does not need to do the laundry, his 17 year old typical sister does not do the laundry for herself so why should he.”

I could go on and on with comments that I have heard in which parents feel that they cannot expect their special needs child to assume responsibility for daily/ functional activities.

Why does the child become a guest?

It is usually a progression to the state of “guestness” that occurs naturally out of necessity. It is not a fault of the parents but rather a survival technique. As the parents often state, it is faster and easier to do the task by themselves as opposed to involving the child. Given the hectic, packed schedules that most special needs children have, being on time is a necessity and a challenge. Often the parents feel that the child’s life is already too difficult for him so why make it more difficult.

When raising a typical child there is a push pull between the parent guiding the child and the child guiding the parent. As a typical child is raised, there is a balance between making him happy and challenging him. If a typical child is not challenged, the child will look for variations and will challenge himself bringing the parent along, i.e., the child will tell the parent, “leave me alone, I can do it myself.”

It is harder with the special needs child as that child does not guide and does not create change or challenges for himself. In fact, the child may fear challenges as he has not had success with change. Therefore, your child may not push for change and may fight challenges. Without change, your child will not think and will focus on repetitive routines and self stimulatory behaviors. The lack of desire for change is not healthy as it can create a static life which then limits the quality of life not only for your child but also for those around him.

**INSISTING ON EATING THE SAME LUNCH/ HAVING TO HAVE THE TABLE SET IN EXACTLY THE SAME WAY/ NEEDING TO BE HOME AT EXACTLY THE SAME TIME OR THERE IS A MELT DOWN FOR ANY OF THE ABOVE.**

Therefore as a parent of a child with special needs, it is your job to:

- act as a guide for the child despite the push back from the child;
- figure out how to guide your child without overwhelming the child; and
- help your child to think about life and to be part of life.

Autistic children can and do take pride in what they accomplish and they do enjoy challenges. However, it is necessary to figure out how to help your child to accept challenges without being overwhelmed.

If you choose to use activities of daily living/ functional tasks as a means of involving your child in life, it may take you longer to do a functional task with the child as opposed to doing the task alone. However, the child's acquisition of the ability to perform that task eventually will allow you time to do something else!

So...why wait until your child's adaptive skills are tested and found to be low? Why wait until the child is an adult and he has to develop life survival skills? Don't you need help around the house? Don't you want to stop having a permanent guest? Don't you want more time for yourself? If you are still not convinced, you can eliminate your guilt about placing demands on your child by realizing that your child can gain extensive knowledge and skills while helping you to do chores around the house.

**Vocabulary development occurs as you and your child do the task:**

- You and your child talk about what you are doing and you label the materials you are using, the actions you are taking and the locations in which he/she is placing the item.
- You send your child to get specific items.
- You expect your child to ask for missing materials.
- You expect your child to direct you to do an aspect of the task.

**Experience sharing occurs:**

- While you and your child work together, you talk about what you are doing.
- When something unexpected occurs, you comment on it, e.g., oh no, the floor is all wet!
- When the task has been completed, you and the child report on the activity to someone else.
- You express your feelings about doing the task, e.g., this is hard/ my hands hurt/I like it better working with you than working alone.

**Language development is fostered through:**

- Developing the vocabulary related to each skill.
- Using the vocabulary in sentences (the level determined by your child's language ability) to talk about what you are doing.
- Understanding language as the language is tied to a concrete, ongoing experience.
- Using language across different communicative functions during the task: commenting, requesting, directing, comparing, exclaiming, questioning, and reporting.
- Chaining of sentences to describe the sequence of steps for the task.
- Stating and experiencing causal factors within the task, e.g., oh no, I spilled the water, the floor is wet.
- Conversing about what you are doing.
- Conversing about what you have completed and talking about what you will have to do next.
- Talking about the task you are doing in comparison to a task that you had done on another day.

**Awareness of cause and effect is fostered by:**

- Noticing that materials change based on what you do to them (e.g., you wash a shirt and it gets wet, you leave a wet sponge out and it gets dry and hard).
- Understanding that a condition could have been caused by different actions, e.g., the table could get wet when you spilled water, juice or milk and the table got wet when you wiped it with a wet cloth.
- Understanding that actions the child takes can change the condition (e.g., if the child wipes the table it will be clean).
- Understanding that conditions change even if you did not plan for them (e.g., accidentally knocking a bucket over and the floor and your shoes get wet).

**Understanding the sequencing of events is fostered by:**

- Participating in tasks that are made up of steps.
- Understanding that one step logically precedes another step.
- Understanding that the steps of a sequence might change from one performance to another because of different conditions.
- Understanding that elements within a sequence can change from one performance to another (e.g., using liquid soap one time and powdered soap another time).
- Recognizing that events that occur in the middle of a sequence may change the rest of the sequence.
- Realizing that you may plan to do a task one way but may not be able to carry through with that plan and so that the sequence of steps must be altered.
- Understanding that materials change across the sequence of steps.

**Cognitive flexibility is fostered by:**

- Understanding that you can use the same materials for different tasks, e.g., a sponge to soak up a spill/ a sponge to wipe table/ a bucket to wash the floor/ a bucket to wash a car.
- Understanding that you can use different materials for the same task: a paper towel to soak up a spill/ a sponge to wipe up a spill/ a towel to wipe up a spill/ a sleeve of a shirt to wipe up a spill.
- Understanding that you can take a long time to do the task.
- Understanding that you can take a short time to do the task if you hurry.
- Realizing that different people do the same task in different ways.
- Understanding that elements of a task may change.
- Understanding that the sequence of steps might change.
- Understanding that there can be different end points to a task (concept of good enough depending on the need, e.g., setting the table for a nightly dinner vs. setting the table for a party).

**Dynamic analysis is fostered by:**

- Realizing that you may have to change the way you do the task depending on the materials you have.
- Realizing that you may have to change the way you do the task depending on the time you have allotted to do the task. (That concept of "hurry up we're late/ you can wait to do that later.")
- Understanding that the task will change depending on where you have to do it.
- Understanding that the task will change if you do the task with a different person, another person or many people.
- Understanding that the task will change if you do the task with an adult vs. a child.
- Understanding that the task will change if you do the task with a tall person as opposed to a short person.
- Recognizing that the way you do the task may change if you have lots of tasks to do that day.

**Flexible problem solving is fostered by:**

- Making adjustments when materials are missing.
- Making adjustments when time is short.
- Making adjustments when a mishap occurs while doing the task. (The dog walks in with muddy paws while you are washing the floor.)
- Making adjustments to differences in conditions that were unexpectedly present at the outset of the task (e.g., it is raining outside and you have to take the garbage out).
- Making adjustments when what you try does not work.
- Making adjustments when tools break.

**The ability to remain within an interaction is fostered when:**

- The child has to work with someone else to do a task.
- Each person is given a role in doing the task.
- Roles/jobs are switched within the task.
- Challenges occur while the child is fulfilling his role.
- Roles/jobs are chained within the task and across tasks. (First pouring in the ingredients, then stirring then scooping the batter.)

- The child needs to emulate what the other person is doing. (Following along to make the same thing.)
- The child has to wait until the other person completes one aspect of the task before he can begin his job. (First I take the clothing item out of the washer and then you put it into the dryer.)

**Self awareness is fostered through:**

- Recognizing that working hard gets the task done.
- Understanding that completion of the task helps others while lack of completion hinders others.
- Recognizing that a task that is hard the first time will get easier with practice, i.e., awareness of learning over time.
- Understanding that you like to use certain tools better than others.
- Recognizing that doing a task with someone else makes it easier.
- Understanding that planning the task supports efficiency.
- Recognizing that working quickly will allow for more time to do something else but working too quickly may negatively impact the quality of the outcome.
- Understanding that mistakes don't matter.
- Understanding that a mistake may help you to learn.
- Understanding that sometimes someone else might want to do the task that you like to do.
- Recognizing that pleasing/helping someone else brings pleasure to you.
- Feeling good about yourself because you can complete tasks necessary for life.
- Feeling competent because you can accomplish tasks.
- Feeling good about yourself by being an active member of the family.
- Developing a sense of pride as others appreciate what has been done.

**Episodic memories can be fostered by:**

- Developing joint memories with someone else as you work side by side.
- Completing a task for which you are pleased about the outcome.
- Experiencing moments within tasks that are funny or scary.
- Planning the activity and then completing it.
- Comparing one task to another.
- Sharing comments about the task with another person.

**Visual referencing and attunement skills are fostered when:**

- The partner's emotional responses are exaggerated and slowed down within the task.
- Language is lessened and visual referencing for the specific materials is exaggerated.
- Two items are offered but one is visually referenced in an exaggerated way.
- The location for an item is spotlighted through visual gaze as opposed to language.
- An item is taken from the child but the child's hand is held as well as the item so that the child shifts his/her visual attention up to the person.
- An item is given to the child while holding onto the child's hand so the child shifts his/her visual attention to the person.
- Yes/no questions are answered through head shakes and nods.

**Fine motor skills are fostered when:**

- The child is expected to assume a role/job in the activity.
- Specific tasks are divided into two parts so that the fine motor skill requirement is easier and the child can be successful.
- There are expectations for performance levels that the child needs to meet.
- The child is given opportunities to use basic tools (e.g., a sponge).
- The child is given opportunities to do the task repeatedly.

**Basic functional science knowledge is fostered:**

- When liquids must be soaked up, items have holes in them or there are changes in the temperature that affects the materials.
- When doing cleaning tasks, observing the amounts involved: too much vs. too little soap, ratio of water to cleaning liquid, big spills vs. little spills.
- When doing cleaning tasks, the impact of force, speed, and choice of materials on the ability to do the task successfully.
- When doing cooking and cleaning tasks, the impact of temperature change on materials and the transformation of materials from one state to another or the emulsification of one liquid within another.
- The type of spill and the corresponding method for cleaning.

### **Basic academic skills are reinforced:**

- When the child has to get a specific number of items.
- When the child needs to recognize the labels of cleaning items.
- When the child needs to create space to put away items.
- When the child has to sort items into appropriate places.
- When the child needs to follow specific steps within directions.
- When the child has to judge if an item is empty or full, wet or dry, big or little, sticky/dirty or clean.

### **Sensory issues can be confronted:**

- When the child learns how to make adjustments so that he/she can participate despite sensory issues, e.g., wearing rubber gloves.
- When the child becomes involved in a task and can stay in his role, despite the presence of a sensory stimuli that makes him a little uncomfortable.
- Through repeated exposure, sensory issues sometimes lessen.

In addition to the above, the child will learn the skills that will allow him/her to function in life more independently. The child will learn that he/she is a contributing member of a family unit. Others in the household will make the same observation! The more time the child spends doing functional tasks, the less time he will have to do self stimulatory behaviors or to focus on obsessive interests.

As a concrete example, understand that a child who is involved in washing dishes, learns the following and more:

Labels for each of the dishes, the verbs wash, rinse, scrub, the sequence of steps for washing the dishes, the causal factors that the dried food on the plate makes the dish dirty, hot water cleans better than cold water, soap cleans better than plain water, it is fun to blow soap bubbles, certain foods are easier to wash off a plate than others, sponges don't work as well as scrub pads, rinsing is good enough for dishes going into the dishwasher, it is okay to touch soapy water if I wear rubber gloves, Mom washed dishes with her mother too, Mom does not like the smell of sour milk, paper towel falls apart when it gets wet no matter what they say on television, a small sponge does not soak up as much water as a big sponge, I can wash five plates faster than I can wash five cups.

Clearly, all this learning will not take place washing dishes one time, but that is fine since there are lots of opportunities to wash dishes every day!

The “why bother” is because it feels good to succeed. The child feels good about success and the parents feel good about the child’s success. When the child confronts a task and succeeds it can lead to further successes. If parents see that the child is capable, they will push for further growth. It is a cyclical reaction!

Parents will often ask: How am I going to get my child to participate in functional/daily activities? It is not a fun thing to do. However, if the child feels competent, then the competence will support his participation. It will be the parent’s role to facilitate participation in a manner that allows the child to assume some aspect of the task without being overwhelmed. In this way, competence is established from the outset of the task.

As stated by Rogoff (p.39) with reference to typical children, “parents will guide participation by establishing routine activities, structuring the novices’ efforts and gradually transferring the handling of responsibility to the novice.” The child would then become an active learner within the context of a person who supports, challenges and guides. **The child participates in activities with a sense of competence and because of a sense of competence.**

“The motto for the development of competence needs to be: *where before there was a spectator, let there now be a participant.* Once set, the activity provides a scaffold to assure that the child’s ineptitudes can be rescued or rectified by the appropriate intervention, and then removes the scaffold part by part as the reciprocal structure can stand on its own.” (Bruner, 1983, p. 60)

While the routines may have to be different and the changes might have to move at a slower pace, there is no reason why the same philosophy should not be applied to the special needs child. The parent needs to be the guide to lead the child to competence.

**It will be through the development of competence that the child will become an individual who is willing to participate in life without the use of external rewards but through internal motivation.**

**A sense of competence is actually a better motivator than M&M’s.**

## **Comments? Questions?**

**Contact:**

**Nancy Z. Schwartz, PhD**

Communication Clinic of Connecticut, LLC

CCC226@aol.com

(203) 544-9560