

**Autism Advice Q&A**

**Lucy Chetty, Head Teacher, New Struan School**

**21 May 2020 at 7pm**

Question

How do I support my child or young person who seems to have lost all motivation since lockdown?

Answer

Now that we're further into lockdown - this is coming up a little bit more frequently for families who are starting to feel it's getting harder to keep that momentum going and to keep that pattern and that routine for the children.

I think focusing back on that concept of that locus of control; what can I change here what do I have control over because the more safe and certain and predictable we can make the environment for the child the safer and more comfortable they're going to feel.

I think there's something about being able to take this current situation that we're in and use that as a way of trying to reduce the stresses. Take it as time to spend as a family not worrying about home-schooling but actually finding a way of learning to interact together as family rather than feeling a huge amount of pressure to replicate a structure that they would have had at school or a learning program that would have happened at school so that pressure is just completely removed.

I think key is structure and key is predictability, that helps the children feel in control and when the feeling in control they're feeling less stressed and that doesn't necessarily need to be a full day school timetable; that might just be the pertinent punches of that particular day. Such as going for a walk or going shopping; all the things that we do know we can do. How can we create certainty around those and put those things into a context for the child because that's often the bit that they find most challenging. However, if each experience is within the context we can make things more predictable and more certain and I think that is quite important.

I think that is brilliant advice Lucy, I think that like you say, things are going on quite a bit now. It's been a number of weeks and things are really challenging for families at home so sometimes just taking some time to take a step back and relax about things and try not to worry too much about those external pressures that families might be facing.

Question

What would your advice be if child or young person has become more violent and distressed since lockdown has begun? Do you have any particular advice about how to cope and manage that type of situation?

Answer

That's a really challenging circumstance that some families are in at the moment. It comes back down to stress and I think really looking at the demands of the stressor just outweighing people's coping mechanisms and that's for the child but also for the rest of the family in that household. That transactional nature of stress; when I am really stressed you become stressed and that temperature is rising and bubbling and I think always coming back to how can we reduce any of those environmental factors? How can we reduce those so that the stressor is less and look more towards building the coping mechanisms that the child might need.

I think the PERMA model of well-being is quite important and pertinent here. Thinking about positive emotions: how we are helping and just identify them and finding them and that's difficult when things are even particularly challenging. The importance of engagement of relationships meaning accomplishments making sure that these elements of that model of well-being are all considered as important as one another so that we're not just focusing on accomplishments and achieving and getting that done. We're going back to what's the relational connection here and do we need to reduce as much of that pressure as and possibly can so that all we're doing is building more and our coping mechanism and our tank if you like.

Exercise too, the importance of exercising and getting out for that daily walk will really help to reduce some of those stresses as much as we can I think remember though when it is a stressful moment and it's a difficult situation try and do as less as you can. Talk less, physically move less try and create as much as a low arousal environment as you can at that moment in time to try and really reduce that stress transaction at that moment. I think remember that we need to be sure our own coping mechanisms are in check before we can help others you know the oxygen mask in the aeroplane I think that's an important analogy to hold on to in to remember and because as time's going on I think it's getting harder for families to see when that end point is going to come and that uncertainly becomes really difficult to deal with.

I think that is very true, reminding people about their own wellbeing particularly parents and carers who are in these particularly challenging situations. The point you mentioned there about the PERMA model, I think that's very interesting and to be mindful of during these times. It is a very difficult time for families and it is very hard to know what to do, we've never experienced this before, so it is very new to everybody who is involved.

Question

If you could offer any advice to families who have a child or young person, who perhaps isn't doing any school work at the moment. What would you say to parents around any concerns they might have to do with their child following behind, will they be able to catch up with their peers at a later date? And do you have any advice for a child who perhaps doesn't engage with things like Google classrooms or any home learning activities?

Answer

I suppose the short answer would be try not to worry. I think it can be challenging for parents to think about home being a school and to start to think, I've got to be a teacher now. The learning will start again and the teachers of your child will pick the child up where they are and they will start learning with them again. There isn't going to be a scenario whereby we can't get our children back into that learning environment and back into engaging but I think the key at the moment is to think about creating a relational and an emotional safe world. We're all dealing with something that we've never dealt with before, there's a huge amount of learning that we're all doing in just coping day by day and rather than us feeling we need to throw in another load of pressure on ourselves to tick all of these boxes to make sure we're doing all of these things brilliantly well.

I think our children are sponges and they're learning about how we are all responding and coping as human beings with one another. I think there's some rich learning in that environment that we have and use that context rather than making yourself feel pressured to have to then worry about things that haven't happened yet.

Picking up a little bit on the return concept I know that we’ve started to think about it within our school and other schools are starting to think about how's that going to work and what that’s going to look like when all of our children come back into our schools. That seems to be the next worry that everybody's starting to move towards and I think we need to all handle that very compassionately and very carefully so that we are not making our children feel worried about coming back to school and those transitions back the way they'll have to happen slowly and no need to happen at the rate that child needs them to happen and we'll have to do as an education world a period of readjusting to something different without making our children feel frightened by that.

So I think don't sweat about it particularly when there is so much other things that we're feeling stressed about just now. Take moments when they come; when you see a spark from your child about something that's caught their interest or something they've seen on television, or something they mentioned and you notice that spark, jump on it. Don't worry too much about it needing to be in the maths slot or the English slot and try and perhaps look at the learning that we can do in a different way just now without feeling too much pressure.

That’s brilliant advice there Lucy and I think that will be really useful to parents and carers and perhaps other family members who are watching today. I just was to reiterate that point about being able to just take a step back and being able to relax about things. Don’t worry too much about keeping up with the demands of what a normal school environment, and school day and all that richness around the learning that would go along with those sort of things what that would normally look like. We're just not in a normal situation at the moment. The richness of those sort of small learning opportunities that come up at home in those times when you least expect it and they don't necessarily fit into a precise category or any of the curriculum, but they are still so so valuable and worthwhile to recognise at the same time.

I think a different pace to how we're all working and we're all living and I think there's something in the slowing down of things just allow us to see the different ways our children can engage with something that might be as simple as getting the dinner ready and having a meal together. There's a huge amount of relational connection and certainty that you can create around that environment coping mechanisms that help your child get through the next little part and knowing that we don't all have the answers just now but it will be okay we'll be okay.