

Talking about COVID-19 with People with Intellectual Disability and Autism (ID/A)

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, researchers are seeing changes in the virus and making changes to safety guidelines. However, one thing that has not changed is the importance of talking about the pandemic. Helping people with ID/A stay informed and minimize anxiety is important to managing their good mental health. The following are strategies family members and caregivers of people with ID/A can use to help have these important talks.

Consider people's feelings.

The pandemic has been challenging for many and traumatic for others. Show empathy by acknowledging the hard things, like how wearing a mask or getting a vaccine are hard things. Recognize that people who have sensory differences may have more difficulty with such things. Show people in your care that you understand; offer suggestions that might make things easier, such as trying out different types of masks.

Welcome questions.

People in your care will likely have questions. Questions might range from whether their friend or co-worker will be OK to if they will get sick, too. Taking a person's questions seriously and answering honestly will help the person feel heard.

Model and explain what you do to stay safe.

When you do things to stay safe, such as put on your mask, point it out by saying, "I am putting on my mask before I go into the store."

Offer safe distance reminders.

When you are in the community with a person in your care, remind them to "keep a safe distance between yourself and others". Try to use the same words every time.

Identify and acknowledge changes in routine.

For many of us, COVID-19 has interrupted plans, holidays, and vacations. When this happens, acknowledge the experience, and offer an explanation as to why it's happening. Try saying, "We can't go out to dinner with your uncle right now; it's not safe for him to be eating indoors." Offer an alternative, such as an outdoor picnic or a video call.

Explain what to expect.

Some places are changing their rules about how to stay safe, even if vaccinated. Research any new places you will be taking the person and inform the person of what will be expected, such as wearing masks.

Ease worries.

It is OK to feel scared or anxious about COVID-19, especially when there is so much out of our control. Remind people of what they can do to stay safe – wear a mask, use physical distance, wash hands often, and get a COVID-19 vaccine.

Use factual and concrete information.

Choose methods of sharing information about COVID-19 that best suit each person's needs to help explain important information about COVID-19. Consider using methods like social stories, pictures, and videos. The *COVID-19 Information By and For People with Disabilities* document, developed by the Green Mountain Self-Advocates, is another helpful tool; it is available at

<https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plain-Language-Information-on-Coronavirus.pdf>

References:

Child Mind Institute. (2020, May 11). Talking to kids about the coronavirus crisis. Retrieved August 12, 2021, from <https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

Center for Disease Control. Retrieved August 12, 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/humandevelopment/documents/covid-easy-read/CaregiverTipSheet.pdf>