

Learning@Home

The Impact on Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

April 22, 2020 -- During this unprecedented time, the widespread effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closures of schools across the province has caused a monumental impact on students and families in ways not limited to academics. Aside from reinforcing the essential role of special services on ensuring student success and well-being for special education needs students; this new form of learning has also shed light on a variety of other challenges including those outlined below.

Attitudinal Barriers – Media or public discussion that devalues the right to an equitable education and the necessary programs, services, accommodations and/or modifications to the delivery of same. Media or public discussion which identifies the accessibility needs and necessary program, service, accommodation and/or modification needs of special education needs students as laborious and unnecessary.

Disability Related Barriers – Special education needs students; particularly students on the autism spectrum are greatly affected by change to their daily routine and tend to suffer a much higher grade of anxiety when faced with uncertainty and fear. In an inclusive classroom, teachers will have access daily to support personnel who can help to provide any instructional or environmental accommodations and sensory breaks to help redirect the student's focus and attention to the task at hand. Student behaviour plans when not working to de-escalate inappropriate behaviour at school often include an exit strategy that involves calling parents or caregivers to come and pick up their child and take them home. Parents and caregivers in a state of self-isolation cannot provide the breadth of accommodations or sensory breaks required to help their child overcome the large and complex emotions they are feeling during the COVID 19 pandemic. These disability barriers are especially difficult when parents are working from home, also have a disability or are struggling with mental health and well-being challenges of their own.. During this uncertain and scary time, any child will look to their parent or guardian as a source of comfort, stability and safety and a child with a disability will take much more time and effort to console, de-escalate and redirect to the *learning@home* program. These barriers are much more pronounced for students who have a developmental disability, delay or are developmentally immature for their age.

Caregiver Stress – Many parents and caregivers are suffering from “caregiver burnout” as they are experiencing the loss of mental health and overall health and well being services for their special education needs children and for their families. Parents and caregivers are tasked with providing the majority of care to their child which requires significant time and energy and this severely impacts on their capacity to support *learning@home*.

- Many health and community services, supports, therapies, etc., are closed or are delivered in a manner which is inaccessible for many families and their children on the autism spectrum.
- Many parents/caregivers are juggling work along with the complex, high needs of their children while also trying to deliver the *learning@home* content.
- Many parents/caregivers, due to COVID-19 have lost their jobs and the income necessary to support their child's health and well-being needs.
- Some parents/caregivers are single-parents, are battling illness (covid-19 or non-covid related) or are caring for ill or aging family members.

Possible Solution:

Coordinate through the TCDSB psychology and social work department to provide small group teleconference circle of care mini-sessions for those families and students that have been identified as at risk during the "check and connect" phase.

Social Isolation – Autism Ontario, Toronto Chapter recognizes and supports the need for strict adherence to social distancing and self-isolation rules during this time as a collaborative means to slow down and stop the spread of COVID-19. We would also like to bring awareness to the fact that individuals with disabilities and their families often struggle with the ability to "stay connected". The consequential loss of adequate and accessible support can lead to a steep rise in mental health crises requiring immediate intervention and/or hospitalization for this already marginalized and isolated demographic.

- Parents and caregivers of children with special education needs reflect a demographic of families that are already experiencing social isolation and feelings of loneliness within our communities.
- Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication which inherently places limitations on the ability of children, youth and young adults to develop friendships and social relationships to which they can stay connected with. The friendship circle for children, youth and young adults on the autism spectrum is often limited to one to two friends during their time at school and/or to any social activities facilitated by school special services staff.
- A heightened rate of post-traumatic stress disorder has already been documented in recent research as a common outcome of quarantine and self-isolation¹

Possible Solution:

Develop peer support programs and new initiatives to connect students with disabilities with their peers by using a variety of different methods such as email, phone and video. Note that students with severe physical disabilities or communication impairments may need creative approaches to connect socially with school friends and peers.

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

Loss of Health & Personal Care Supports – Although these services have been deemed as essential services during this time by the government of Ontario, the restructured model which encompasses a stricter health & safety regime may not provide the same level of service and may not provide accessible care for some..

- Since it has been determined by health officials that [it is possible for asymptomatic individuals to spread the virus](#) and that a person may be contagious for three to 14 days before exhibiting symptoms; families are also opting out of having paraprofessionals/PSWs enter the family home for fear of community contagion of COVID – 19.
- Many families are also choosing not to attend clinic appointments (where available) in order to mitigate the same risk as children may be immune-compromised and there may be developmental barriers making social distancing difficult.

Loss of Access to Therapeutic Services – Many service providers like SLP, OT, PT and ABA/IBI have closed, reduced service provision or are providing services which are not accessible to all.

- Where therapeutic services are available in person; families are also choosing not to attend clinic appointments in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 contagion as many children are immune-compromised and social distancing may be difficult.

Possible Solution:

Many CTCs are setting up on-line platforms and reaching out to individual families with suggestions for therapeutic exercises and activities that can be carried out at home. This should be required for all students on the School Health Support Program. Exercises and activities should be individualized to the student needs and family capacity. See more information regarding COVID-19 changes to service delivery on the [Children's Treatment Network](#) website.

Differentiated Learning – *Learning@home* has become an awakening for parents and caregivers to the belief that systemically, educational goals for students with disabilities are often gauged on low expectations. Being fully engaged and informed now on what the general class expectations are in comparison to what was previously modified for their special education needs child is eye opening. Absent or inconsistent differentiated, accommodated or modified and accessible curriculum provided to meet the learning needs of special education needs students.

- Curriculum content and assignment expectations are often sent to students and parents in a manner tailored to typically developing students only.
- Parents and caregivers of students on the autism spectrum, unless certified in the implementation of Applied Behaviour Analysis techniques, are unable to apply these effective principles when helping their children with *learning@home* (PPM 140 - Incorporating Methods of Applied Behaviour Analysis into Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders²).

² <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/140.html>

Possible Solution:

Parents and caregivers should not be expected to differentiate their child's learning. All homework and learning expectations for students with special education needs should be clearly provided by teachers according to the student's IEP and individual learning profile.

Any additional special education resources that are used by teachers or support staff should be shared with parents and caregivers to support *learning@home*.

Individual Education Plan – *Learning@home*, which has essentially transferred all aspects of the school instructional day to the parent or caregiver, does not include any at home support or guidance on how the IEP, which is a living and legal document will be applied.

- How will necessary accommodations or modifications be applied to the curriculum expectations provided through *learning@home*?
- How will learning goals be monitored?
- How will alternative goals be applied and/or monitored?

Possible Solution:

An IEP review should be included as part of weekly check-ins with students, parents and caregivers to ensure that any *learning@home* student or parent/caregiver concerns are met and resolved in a timely manner.

Accessibility features for on-line learning – Students with disabilities often require a wide range of accessibility features for learning, and some of the *learning@home* recommended learning websites do not provide these features.

Possible Solutions:

All recommended websites should be reviewed to ensure that they have the accessibility features that may be required. The available accessibility features for each site should be clearly identified.

Access to Equipment at school – Families need access to the Special Equipment Amount (SEA) funded equipment that supports learning as well as health and safety, such as and not limited to laptops, walkers, standers, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. Although best efforts have been made by local school staff, families have not been able to retrieve devices which were not taken home at the start of March break.

Possible Solution:

Arrangements to be made to have equipment delivered to student's home.

Transition Planning – Students who are transitioning in the fall to FDLK, a new grade or division, a new school or placement, to post-secondary or even from class to class (PPM 156 –Supporting

Transitions for Students with Special Education Needs³) need to know how planning will occur along with additional support while learning at home.

- Many FDLK students do not and will not have had access to IBI, ABA, Rehabilitative therapies or transition planning during this critical time. This loss of services negatively impacts on ASD student development during *learning@home* and in preparation for September entry/re-entry to school.
- Due to the inherently rigid nature of ASD, the immense difficulty with transitioning smoothly during times of change or unfamiliarity, coupled with the commonality of co-morbid mental health disorders which accompany ASD; students on the spectrum and their families are experiencing extremely high levels of anxiety, stress and multiple barriers to student success during this time.

Possible Solution:

That students, parents/caregivers be provided with staff resources and staff support through a variety of means to support transition planning at home.

Graduation Planning – Students with disabilities who are hoping to graduate in June, are concerned about marks and requirements to graduate or for admission to post secondary. Families and students are concerned about how planning for graduation will be supported.

Possible Solution:

That local Guidance department staff check in with all graduating special education needs students and their families where appropriate to provide support for their chosen pathway.

The understanding that education cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” model is evident. Online learning is not an effective or an accessible means to learn for all students. The spectrum of strengths and needs reflected in every student with autism should be mirrored in the spectrum of services and support readily available to them creating opportunities for a successful future for every student. Special education needs students would strongly benefit from a cross-ministerial strategic plan developed in close collaboration with all provincial and local partners and in particular with our students and their families.

³ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/ppm156.pdf>