

PLUS: UNITED STATES MILITARY SECTION



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WAYS TO SUPPORT AUTISM & SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

BY DEANNA PICON

Raising a child with a disability, while trying to balance work and family responsibilities is no easy task for even the most dedicated parents, under the best of circumstances. Managing all aspects of a special needs child's care, while sheltering in place due to the coronavirus pandemic, is even more stressful and time-consuming.

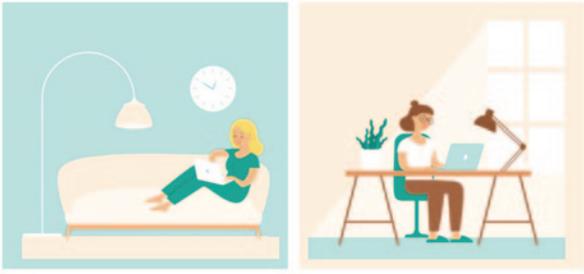
The coronavirus pandemic has created new challenges for all of us, but it has been especially hard for families with special needs children and adults,” said Deanna Picon, founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC and author of *The Autism Parents' Guide to Reclaiming Your Life*. “During this difficult time, any act of kindness given by family, friends and the public would be deeply appreciated by special needs families.”

The necessary structure, routine and services for special needs individuals have been severely disrupted, causing additional stress and responsibilities in these family households. In most cases, special needs children have lost access to school and academic pro-

grams as well as physical, occupational, speech and behavioral therapies. Many adults with disabilities aren't able to attend day habilitation, vocational and recreational programs.

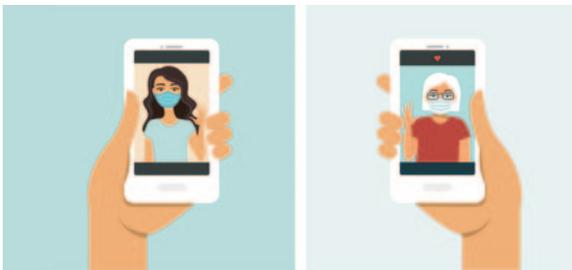
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 54 U.S. children has an autism spectrum disorder.

“Special needs parents courageously face autism and all the enormous challenges and responsibilities that accompany it on a daily basis. They may be your best friend, your cousin, your neighbor or co-worker,” says Picon. “During this pandemic, they've assumed even more tasks and duties with full time caregiving, home schooling and managing the challenging behavioral issues of their children.”



1. KEEP IN TOUCH AND BE SUPPORTIVE.

Special needs parents often feel alone and isolated, so it's really beneficial to let them know you're there, if they need you. With the pandemic, a majority of families are feeling even more isolated and anxious. Many parents are worried about the long-term effects of the pandemic on their children including regression of hard-won skills. Text, email or call to just say "Hello." You can also use Skype, FaceTime and other social media platforms to keep in touch and lend support.



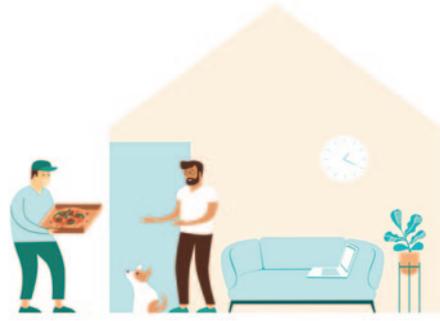
2. LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGEMENT.

Allow special needs parents to vent, cry and blow off some steam. No one expects you to solve their problems or provide solutions. A friendly face or supportive voice on the other end of the telephone works perfectly.



3. HELP WITH EVERYDAY TASKS.

These days, there are long lines everywhere you go. It's common to spend one or two hours waiting to enter essential businesses like supermarkets, banks or pharmacies. Many parents aren't comfortable bringing their children out of the house for fear of a meltdown or possible virus exposure. Others can't leave their special needs child alone at home while running essential errands. If possible, offer to shop for some groceries for these families while you do your own shopping. It'll save parents much needed time and energy.



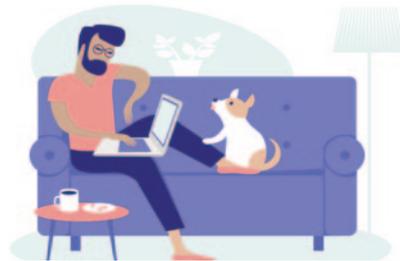
4. SEND A MEAL.

A pizza pie, box of chicken or any take-out meal from local restaurants can make everyone feel good and valued. Not only would you be helping these families, you would also be supporting local businesses who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Many restaurants are now providing free delivery services.



5. EXPRESS YOUR SUPPORT.

Donations to local and national autism organizations are always welcome and appreciated. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, many fundraising events such as autism walks, have been cancelled or postponed. These organizations need the public's help more than ever to support special needs individuals, families and the autism community. You can also purchase goods and services that contribute to autism-related causes.



6. INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS.

This is a perfect time to learn more about autism and other disabilities. Watch a TV news report, read an article or go online to gain a better understanding of these conditions. Start a conversation with a friend or family member.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deanna Picon is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC which provides personalized guidance, comprehensive support programs and seminars for parents of special needs children. Her personal mission is to empower parents as they advocate for their children, while balancing productive work and family lives. She received her BA in psychology and BA in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University. Deanna is a parent of a non-verbal, young man with autism. She is the author of *The Autism Parents' Guide To Reclaiming Your Life*, available from Amazon and through her website, www.yourautismcoach.com. Email her at info@yourautismcoach.com