**Autism Program
McMaster
Children's Hospital**

<u>Behavioural Strategies for Extended Periods at Home without School/Daycare</u>

We know that times of change can be particularly challenging for children and youth with special needs and we appreciate that we are currently in one of those times. The list of general proactive strategies below may be helpful to consider as you plan how best to support your family. As you read, consider your child/youth's individual skills and learning style to determine what will be most successful for your child/youth and your family:

1. **<u>Set a predictable routine</u>**: Schools and daycares have set schedules that allow children and youth to be aware of when activities (e.g., academic subjects, washroom, snack and recess breaks) will be occurring. While home during this time, try to set a **regular schedule** for your child and youth, with the following considerations:

    a. If you are aware of your school or daycare's scheduling, using **similar activities** and following their **daily schedule** (as much as possible) may also be helpful in ensuring your child/youth has a successful transition back to that environment. This may help minimize their adjustment to being at home.

    b. Use a **visual schedule** to show your child the activities that will occur throughout their day and in which order – this system should be tailored to their learning style (e.g., written on paper or in an agenda, written with visuals, just pictures, full day vs. part of the day, etc.)

    c. Incorporate **physical exercise** into the daily routine – this can include indoor activities as appropriate to your child and setting (e.g., jumping jacks, dance parties) as well as appropriate outdoor activities (i.e., following social distancing guidelines). Ideally, include this several times a day – we know from research that physical exercise can show positive benefits in children/youth's behaviour and can assist with higher quality sleep.

    d. If part of your child's schedule, consider scheduling **screen time** in as any other activity is scheduled (i.e., with set limits). It can be challenging for some children to introduce increased access to TV or tablets and then try to take this time away again – identifying an appropriate amount of screen time will be an individual family decision.

    e. Set a **regular bedtime** and **wake up schedule**, as would have been maintained if your child was going to school or daycare. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day will also help in ensuring their routine is less disrupted and they are ready to return to school, when the time comes.

    f. Remember - following a schedule is also an instruction! If your child is following their schedule, **reinforcing (i.e., rewarding) this skill** will make it more likely to keep occurring.
        ▪ Including **preferred and non-preferred tasks** in the schedule (e.g., chores/academic work [as appropriate to your child's skill level], as well as play time/games). Rotating these types of tasks can be helpful to increase motivation. (e.g., 1. Breakfast 2. Help sweep kitchen 3. Play with blocks)

    g. Give **warnings when transitioning** between activities (can include verbal warnings ["5 more minutes"] or using a timer).

    h. Provide **choices where appropriate** in the schedule (e.g., "do you want to play BINGO or Connect4?").

2. **Clear expectations** – use visuals (appropriate for your child/youth) to outline what is expected of them during this time, such as:
   a. **First** (non-preferred tasks) /**Then** (preferred tasks) visuals (text or pictures)
   b. **Visual schedules** (as above) or **Task strips** to show the steps of a job (e.g., the steps of washing hands).
   c. **Models/Video models** – before asking your child to do a task, model the task for them or show them videos of skills you would like them to engage in.
   d. **Social stories** – simple description or pictures of what to expect, age/language appropriate.
   e. **Priming –** If appropriate, prepare your child for events or activities by breaking down what might occur during those activities or events. This can be done with a simple conversation, visual schedule or social story.
   f. **Agendas/Goal setting** (What is your child/youth going to achieve during this time? What will they earn if they do?)
   g. **Rules** - if your child understands simple verbal language, you can post and be consistent with clear family rules, framed in the positive. If appropriate, have the entire family involved in creation of the rules. For e.g.,
      - We walk in the house
      - We keep our hands to ourselves
      - We keep toys on the floor

3. **Environmental safety** – consider how your home is set up. With your child home more during the day, do certain items need to be moved or placed out of reach (e.g., to avoid items being thrown or dumped)? Are there changes that can be made to improve safety for everyone (e.g., are there sharp items that should be moved or locked up)?

4. Children's behaviour tends to be more challenging when they are **unengaged or bored** -this extended time at home will make keeping children engaged a challenge for all. Consider your child's interests and consult online sites (e.g., https://activeparents.ca/things-to-do-indoors/) for ideas that can be adapted for your child and family.

5. **Continue to incorporate skills** that your child has or is working on into your daily routine (e.g., using PECS). By keeping expectations the same, your child/youth will be more likely to succeed or maintain this skill once they're back to their regular routine.

6. Finally: "Catch them being good!" – **reward positive behaviour!**
   a. If your child/youth engages in behaviours that are **appropriate and positive**, reinforce (i.e., reward!) those behaviours, to promote seeing more of them in the future. Consider what is reinforcing for your child. Praise (e.g., "I love how you got dressed by yourself")? A special toy or treat? Keep evaluating what is motivating their behaviour by offering choices often.
   b. Consider **rotating out play materials** (e.g., put a few items away for a few days) so that children are more motivated by them when they see them again!