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A photo was trending on social media of three children who have autism holding signs, “The whole world is overwhelmed by a sudden change of routine. It’s not that easy, huh?”

Danielle Baxter, a 2nd Grade Teacher at Toms River Regional Schools, initially posted the [photo on Twitter](#) for World Autism Awareness Day, Thursday, April 2, in response to some of the public chaos, due to the coronavirus outbreak.

The message is, because of all the changes in the world, those with autism are being significantly impacted.

An organization called [Autism Speaks](#) refers to autism as a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication.

Many people with autism and their families are directly impacted by the coronavirus, seeing changes in services and their everyday life. They have to cope with the uncertainty of what comes next.

## **Radford’s Own Autism Center**

Radford University’s Waldron College of Health and Human Services holds the [Radford University Autism Center](#) that serves as a resource for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), families, teachers, professors, researchers, and students pursuing a future career working with individuals who have ASD.

“It has been challenging, and I feel for families who have had to take over as teacher, therapist, etc. with their children. I look forward to getting back to some sense of normalcy soon,” Dr. Millar said. Dr. Diane Millar, Director of the Radford University Autism Center and Chair of Communication Sciences and Disorders, explained that this is a challenging time for all of us and those with challenges in the area of social skills, this could be particularly difficult for them.

Dr. Millar explained that most individuals with ASD do best with structure and routine, and everyone's routine has been negatively impacted.

"I think it is important to note that although there is often a perception that individuals on the spectrum avoid socialization, this is not true. Most individuals on the spectrum crave social interaction as much as those without ASD; it is the understanding and use of common social routines that are impaired, not the desire to interact," Millar said.

Daily structure for not only the individuals with ASD has changed, but for their parents too.

Dr. Millar said that she knows school districts have worked hard to continue to provide services to children in the community with a diagnosis of autism.

"It has been challenging, and I feel for families who have had to take over as teacher, therapist, etc. with their children. I look forward to getting back to some sense of normalcy soon," Dr. Millar said.

The center had to close their clinic, but they are hoping to offer some telehealth services for their clients.

Dr. Millar had to cancel her Saturday Social Skills group for adolescents on the spectrum, but they hope to reconvene as soon as they can.

In other parts of Virginia, organizations that support an individual's inclusion and participation in the community are working with the same behavior topic with individuals who have ASD.

## **The Arc**



Photo Credit: (The Arc of Greater Prince William/INSIGHT, Inc.)

Kayla McDonald, an Adjunct Faculty at George Mason University and a family support assistant at The Arc of Greater Prince William/INSIGHT, Inc., an organization that promotes and protects the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, said, “We are beginning to realize that daily structure is challenged right now” ... and if they had a structure or routine, it would be difficult to follow right now.

“Many of their worlds have been shifted upside down,” McDonald said. They are working on flexibility right now as everyone is hyper-focused on improving skills at home and through telecommunications.

“Many of their worlds have been shifted upside down,” McDonald said.

McDonald said that those who go to therapy weekly are struggling because it’s not necessarily an option right now, “behaviors have been a big topic.”

## **The Parents**

McDonald explained that the parents are also essential to focus on so they can support their kids in the best way possible. Some of these parents are missing parent support workshops to help their kids.

However, parents and their kids are responding to the situation by keeping open communication, having conversations with individuals and families over the phone, and doing segments through the Live feature on Facebook.

Recently, the Easter Bunny and staff members from The Arc of Greater Prince William visited homes surprising families.

The organization posted on Facebook Thursday, "We have some exciting virtual activities planned for next week! We plan to kick the week off with Cookies and Conversations on Monday, April 20 at 2 p.m."

"This is a time to come together through a virtual call (via Facebook Messenger), connect with friends, and eat cookies. If you are interested in joining us for the video call like this post or comment below and we will add you to the video call," the Facebook post read.

**Photo Credit: (Danielle Baxter)**