

## "We're surviving"

How parents of children with special needs adjusted to the initial shutdown

By: Kamy Smelser

Chicago parent Ali Goodman was able to deftly juggle career and family responsibilities until the coronavirus outbreak thrust her into a situation requiring all of her attention and energy.

"We're surviving," said Goodman, mother of 6-year-old Jackson who was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and 2-year-old Jordan. "How are we more tired now than we were before? They require more brain power to keep them entertained all day."

Goodman is one of a number of Chicago parents who were turned into homeschool teachers of their children with special needs by the pandemic. Tackling challenges such as adjusting to a new routine and juggling being a mom, remote working, now homeschool teacher and personal therapist.

"There is no quiet," Goodman said. Being stuck-at-home has put a temporary halt on her career as an actress and host of "Acting-Up with Ali Goodman" podcast.

To restore sanity, she implements what she calls: "I need my 20 seconds," Goodman hugs her husband, an ACT and SAT tutor, and her boys for 20 seconds bringing them together even when things get chaotic.

Keeping up with Jackson's therapy and education is another challenge for Goodman, "We didn't think he'd be able to handle remote learning, he doesn't follow directions the same way as other students," she said, explaining that her son thrives off of verbal information rather than the visual learning of remote classes.

"In some ways, there may be a silver lining to this pandemic," said Meghan O'Neill, MD Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. "Parents may have the opportunity to really see some of the more nuanced progress that their child [with special needs] has made so far this year while allowing parents to specifically identify certain skills to target during this time."

Former Washington Post Iraq and Afghanistan war reporter, Jackie Spinner, has struggled to stay motivated taking this on by herself as a single mom of Moroccan adopted 8-year-old Samir who has autism and 5-year-old Rafi who no longer has an autism diagnosis.

“There just are not enough hours in the day to teach them and to teach my students,” said Spinner, Associate professor at Columbia. “Every morning I wake up in a bit of a panic as I try to figure out how I will possibly get it all done.

Online platforms and remote learning may not be suitable for diverse learners. Parents like Spinner worry whether their child can keep up with the curriculum and receive the legally entitled support they rely on.

Spinner said she pushed back against an online platform her child’s public school provided that created a ranking system among the kids in the class, which created unhealthy competition.

“I am finding that many of the online learning platforms are not suitable for diverse learners,” Spinner said. “My son has visual processing issues, and I found that he just couldn’t pay attention to the weekly story read aloud to him.”

In order to make remote learning accessible for Samir, Spinner had to purchase all the books and paper copies to provide the learning and resources he needed.

Always looming is the difficulty of the transition back to school in the fall. “I think the challenges we see this fall may be magnified because of the sheer amount of time that children have spent away from school in the comfort of their own homes,” O’Neill says.

Samir’s reading and math skills have improved over the course of being stuck at home. “The trick will be figuring out how to duplicate this when he returns to school,” Spinner said.

O’Neill recommends the wide range of skill-building opportunities and strategies given on [EchoAutism.org](https://echoautism.org) and [Autism Research Institute](https://autismresearchinstitute.org) for parents and their children with special needs.

“I encourage parents to remember that although this is a stressful time for everyone, it may also be a time of renewed family bonding and a time full of opportunity to learn, practice, engage and grow as a family,” O’Neill says. “Remember to try to have fun and enjoy your children.”

Spinner’s former career as a war reporter has put her through times of fear and uncertainty, but said she still strives to look for joy in these times. While work can take up a good chunk of her time, she takes a break to go work in her garden and spends time with her kids to ride scooters around the neighborhood.

“This is a marathon, not a sprint,” Goodman said. “We need to be okay with being imperfect, we will all get there, there is no finish line and hats off to the single parents facing this alone.”