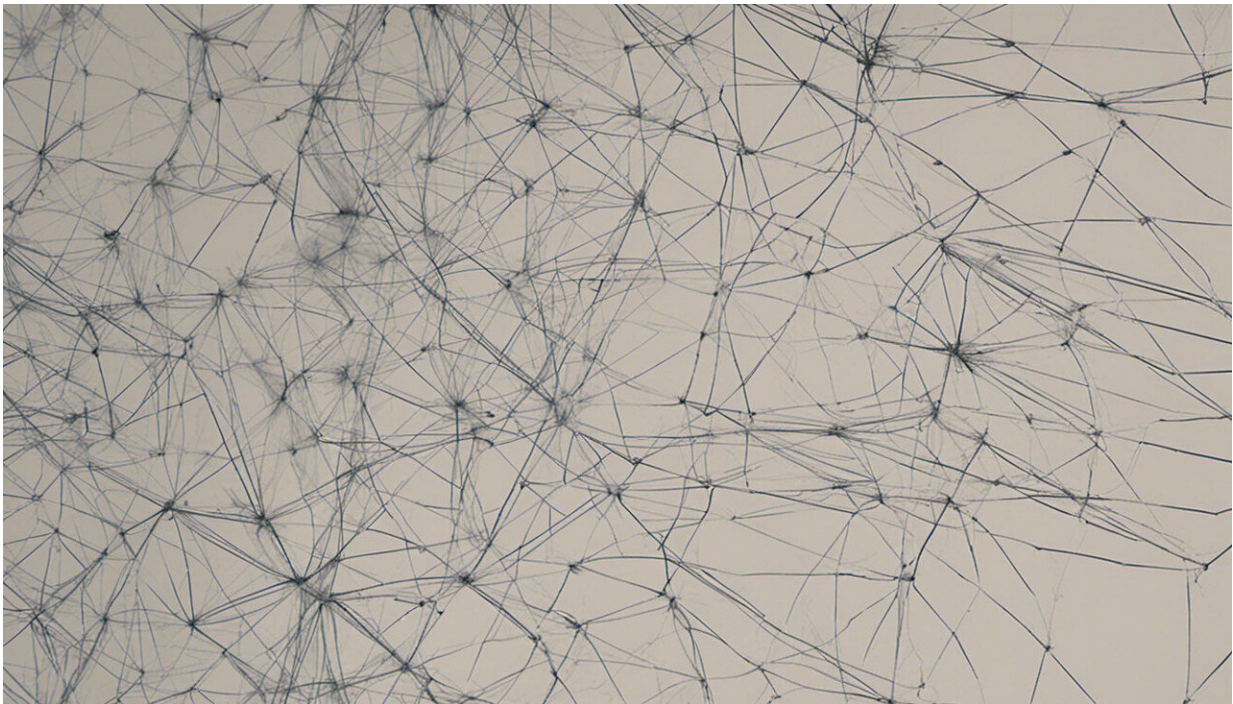


Researchers urge extra support for homeschooling vulnerable children

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As Australia's teachers strive to shift education online, parents everywhere are bracing for change, but no more so than parents of children with additional needs such as autism, who fear their kids may be left behind in the race to adjust.

With the [school](#) term just a few weeks away, pediatric and occupational therapy experts, University of South Australia's Dr. Kobie Boshoff and Kultar Ahluwalia are urging teachers to be especially mindful of students with additional needs, advising that these families are likely to need extra support during these times of uncertainty.

"There's no doubt that teachers and schools are doing their absolute best to get their classes ready for online teaching. But in the dash to go digital, some of our more vulnerable families may slip between the cracks, particularly those with [children](#) with disabilities, learning difficulties, or from non-English speaking backgrounds," Dr. Boshoff says.

"These are the kids that regularly receive support in class. So, as we see school shift to a different learning environment, so too will those supports need to be adjusted.

"Children with autism are particularly at risk as they generally don't respond well to change, preferring predictable routines and environments to manage the world around them. Now, with severe restrictions imposed, these kids could struggle, and so will their families.

"We're urging schools to reach out to these families to reassure them that strategies and supports will be in place to specifically help them and their children.

"Families are really concerned, and rightly so. Some of these children have tailored learning methodologies and curricula that require a hands-on approach to deliver, so [parents](#) are at a loss as to how they can manage this, while also holding down a job—it's an impossible scenario, but the load can be lightened if appropriate support is communicated and delivered."

According to UniSA research, while parents of children with autism regularly advocate for their child, their calls for help often fall on deaf ears.

Occupational therapist at UniSA's City West Health and Medical Clinic, Kultar Ahluwalia, says finding ways to be flexible and adaptable is extremely important.

"Now is the time for schools and parents to work more closely and collaboratively to develop suitable learning-at-home solutions for their children," Ahluwalia says.

"If parents request alternative approaches for their child—for example, hard copy materials, tailored learning plans or regular phone catch-ups—then this is something that should be reasonably accommodated.

"Working together and supporting the mental health of vulnerable families is essential, especially now, and teachers must be prepared to be available for these families.

"We understand that there are massive adjustments for teachers and schools too, but spare a thought for parents who are already struggling with their child's additional needs—add schooling to the mix, no respite, and very few outlets for a break (either for themselves or their child) and it's a tough gig.

"Supporting these families could be as simple as a phone call, but the key is: be accessible and please, reach out."

More information: K. Boshoff et al. Parents' voices: "Our process of advocating for our child with autism." A meta-synthesis of parents' perspectives, *Child: Care, Health and Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/cch.12504](https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12504)

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