

Cheerbook 2020

I am a mother of a typical, technology-loving, occasionally-moody, 15-year old teenager who also happens to be autistic. As with many autistic individuals, routines and schedules are extremely important and bring a sense of calmness and peace. Things changed quickly with the onset of COVID-19 cases in Hawai'i.

It was during spring break that we learned school would remain closed for another few weeks. In addition, my husband and I just made the decision for our daughter to stay home with us instead of going to her grandparents' house to decrease the risk of infecting them. It did not occur to me how all these changes were affecting her until we were shopping at the supermarket one afternoon. We were making a quick stop to buy a few groceries when it happened. The market was crowded, but the paper goods aisle was empty. She took one look at the bare shelves, turned to me, and broke down crying. "I just want things to go back to normal" was all she could say between sobs. She cried on my shoulder for at least two minutes in the middle of the aisle. That week, there were at least two more meltdowns, triggered by random things that reminded her things were not "normal."

That was when I decided I needed to accept this situation we were in and help her focus on the positive. I wanted to help her realize this situation was an opportunity to do things we normally would not get to do. The first step was to set up a daily schedule. Routines and schedules at home were familiar to her and brought back some of the "normalcy" she was missing. The schedule was general enough that she had choices throughout the day but still structured enough to give her a routine. Every morning started with a walk around the neighborhood, followed by a handwritten letter or video chat with family and friends. Once school enrichment activities began, the schedule included schoolwork.

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For each of the activities, we made sure to take photos. It began with photos of our walks and her scavenger hunt birthday activity. We continued with snapshots of cooking, then Lego projects and puzzles. Before I knew it, I accumulated over 100 photos. I decided to put it together in an album we could look back on, like a yearbook. That is when I thought of “Cheerbook 2020” – a yearbook of our time in COVID-19 Quarantine.

We organized our photos (with the help of an online photobook company) and put our memories together in albums. Each album was a two-month collection of our activities with captions. Like a school year, this is a period in our life we will look back and remember one day. The news and history books record the hardships and struggles from our community and around the world. We want to remember the positive things that happened in our home and how we made the best of our bonus time together.