

Information Sheet

Playground Strategies

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For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the playground can be a confusing and intimidating place. Without the structure and routine of the classroom, students may feel stressed and anxious. The strategies below may assist students with ASD to transition smoothly to the playground.

Choosing a Game or Activity

Students with ASD can find the unstructured nature of the playground overwhelming. Unlike the structure of the classroom, there are no clear guidelines about what to do. Here are a few ideas to help students during their lunch and break times.

- Give the student concrete choices about lunchtime activities if they are unsure. Offering 2 or 3 activities (eg ball game, monkey bars or hopscotch) may make it easier for the student to decide. A visual representation of each activity may also aid comprehension.
- Make lunchtimes feel more structured by generating a picture schedule of activities. A lunchtime schedule might comprise several activities such as *eat lunch, go to toilet, go on swings, play hopscotch, have drink of water, and play on monkey bars.*
- Having these activities pictorially represented can allow the student to feel prepared during lunchtimes and for going back into the classroom afterwards. It is also a concrete way for them to see what is

going on, and provides a sense of completion if the student is able to add each activity to a 'Finish Box' once completed.

- Help set up lunchtime clubs that the student can join to meet others and discuss common interests. Clubs for chess, comics, computer games and drama can all be a great way for students with ASD to enjoy lunch time and make meaningful connections with other students.



Downtime

Sometimes students with ASD need time away from others to relax and recharge. Keeping up with the demands of the classroom may take huge amounts of energy, and the behaviour of other students can seem confusing. Below are some ideas to help students feel more comfortable at lunch time.

- Some children may only want to spend half of their lunchtime outside on the playground, and would prefer to help the

teacher prepare for the next lesson or pack away the morning's materials.

- Try to organise a quiet place in the playground where students can go if feeling overwhelmed. This should be somewhere that is easily accessible and is linked to other play areas. A tunnel or indoor play area that is insulated against the noise of the playground would be ideal.
- After returning from lunch, give students a few minutes to calm down and prepare themselves for the lesson. This could involve listening to music, reading a book or just sitting quietly. This time can also be useful in helping students with ASD differentiate the rules of class time from lunch time, e.g. remembering to speak quietly in the classroom and walking instead of running.
- If the student is supported by an education support officer, it could be worth exploring whether some of their time could be spent in the playground to provide an opportunity for teaching the unwritten social rules of the playground.

Skills for Interaction

Parents, school staff and peers can help teach a student with ASD skills that can assist them at lunchtime.

- Teach useful conversation starters that will help the student initiate interaction with peers and join in games at lunchtime. You might like to write these down on small cards so the student can refer to them if stuck for ideas.
- Teach skills to initiate games with other students in an appropriate way. Sometimes students with ASD may try to start games but do not realise they are doing it in an inappropriate way, e.g. grabbing another child's toy. It is important to equip them with skills to interact with peers in an appropriate and friendly way.
- Help the student to generalise these skills so they can be used with different people,

different situations and different games.

- Teach the student strategies to respond to unwanted attention or bullying during lunchtime. This could be as simple as walking away, going to a teacher or a designated 'safe spot'.
- Make sure the student knows who to turn to if feeling distressed or upset at lunchtime. If not the classroom teacher, this might be the 'yard duty teacher' or school support staff in the office.
- Use Social Scripts to teach play skills and acceptable playground behaviour.
- Help to organise a 'buddy system' where responsible students help the student with ASD during lunchtimes. Be mindful of the student with ASD's preference of buddy (by pairing them with someone they like or have things in common with).
- Give some students the responsibility of maintaining general playground discipline. While this system is less specific than a 'buddy system' it is still another safeguard for the student with ASD, and will ensure any inappropriate behaviour towards the student with ASD will be reported.

References

The National Autistic Society - Education: understanding difficulties at break time and lunchtime. Available from: <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/education/educational-professionals-in-schools/lessons-and-breaktimes/education-understanding-difficulties-at-break-time-and-lunchtime.aspx>

Autism Help – coping with recess and lunch breaks. Available from: <http://www.autismhelp.info/primary-years/social-skills/>

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