

Playground Strategies

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For students on the autism spectrum, the playground can be a confusing and frightening place. Without the structure and routine of the classroom, students can feel stressed and anxious. The strategies below might help autistic students to transition smoothly to the playground.

Choosing a Game or Activity

Students on the spectrum 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. You can offer two or three activities (for example, ball game, monkey bars or hopscotch) for the student to choose from. A picture of each activity can help the student to understand the choices.
- Make lunchtimes feel more structured by making a picture schedule of activities. A lunchtime schedule might include activities such as eat lunch, go to toilet, go on swings, play hopscotch, have drink of water, and play on monkey bars. The student can add each activity to a 'Finish Box' once completed.
- Use the picture schedule of activities before lunchtime to help the student to feel prepared and for going back into the classroom afterwards.

- Help set up lunchtime clubs that the student can join to meet others and talk about common interests. For example, clubs around a shared interest like comics, computer games or drama can help students on the autism spectrum to enjoy lunchtime and make meaningful connections with other students.



Downtime

Sometimes autistic students 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 easy to get to and is linked to other play areas. For example, a tunnel or indoor play area that is insulated against the noise of the playground.
- After returning from lunch, teachers can help students by giving them 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 on the spectrum recognise differences in the class rules compared to lunchtime rules, for example, remembering to speak quietly in the classroom and walking instead of running.
- If the student is supported by an education support officer, explore whether they could support the student in the playground and teach the unwritten social rules.

Skills for Interaction

Parents, school staff and peers can help teach a student on the spectrum skills that can help them at lunchtime.

- Teach useful conversation starters that will help the student talk 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 start games with other students in an appropriate and friendly way. Sometimes students may try to start games but don't realise they are doing it in an inappropriate way, for example, grabbing another student's toy.
- 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 to an agreed 'safe spot'.
- Make sure the student knows who to turn to if feeling overwhelmed 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 on the spectrum during lunchtimes. Be mindful of the autistic student's preference of buddy (by pairing them with someone they like or have things in common with).
- Give some students the responsibility of checking that general playground rules are followed. This can include reporting any inappropriate behaviour towards the autistic student.

References

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