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Coping in the playground

“A child with autism was allowed to choose one friend to join him and play his Nintendo at recess. He quickly went from being ostracised to the most popular boy in school!”

Points to note

- The playground can be a really threatening environment to a child with autism. There is no structure or routine to recess and lunchtime. Children with autism love routine, so they often feel stressed or anxious during this time. Normally-developing children use playtime to release stresses and just ‘have a break’; the child with autism may return to the classroom too stressed to concentrate and participate in any way.
- In the playground, there is a lot of free movement, noise and vast open spaces. There are unwritten rules that must be adhered to. There are many sights, sounds and smells to deal with. These often cause of stress and anxiety.
- The child with autism may prefer to withdraw during recess and lunch breaks because he is so tired from the social demands and sensory overload in the classroom. In the school ground, there is a lot of free movement, noise and vast open spaces. There are unwritten rules that must be adhered to. There are many sights, sounds and smells to deal with. These often cause stress and anxiety.
- The child may lack imaginative and creative play skills; he may prefer solitary or repetitive pursuits, such as computer games. This puts him at a disadvantage socially.
- The child will be vulnerable to teasing and bullying, both physical and verbal, during recess and lunch. His unusual behaviour and poor social skills make him stand out as an easy target. He may lack assertiveness and coping mechanisms to deal with this behaviour, which may result in angry outbursts in class sometime after the event. He may not be able to express his feelings of distress to an adult.
- The child may be naïve and trusting and may be easily led into trouble by others who seek to manipulate him, perhaps suggesting he go ‘out of bounds’ or outside the school grounds.
- In the playground, the poor motor skills of the child with autism will be painfully obvious to all. While other children play ball games, the child with autism may avoid doing so because of his poor co-ordination and/or motor skills. Attempts to join in ball games may lead to ridicule.
- Some children with autism are ‘wanderers’ who have little sense of personal danger and no understanding of school boundaries.
- Accept that the child may need to be on his own at times, but provide support should the child wish to join social activities.
- Encourage the child to learn by watching others play. If the child has an integration aide it would be helpful to assign some aide time to supervising and supporting the child in the playground. Talk through the activities to explain the role of each person.
- Teach useful opening lines to help the child join in conversations.

- Teach and encourage the child to practise playground games and ball handling skills.
- Mark a school map with boundaries and 'no-go' areas to ensure the child clearly understands where he can and cannot go.
- Support the child in how to respond to teasing and unwanted social approaches by other children.
- Autism is an invisible handicap – a child with autism doesn't really look any different to other children, making it difficult for staff on yard duty to understand the child's needs. All teaching staff should be aware of the child's social difficulties to make allowances (but not excuses) for his behaviour. Place a photo of the child in the staffroom along with notes about his behaviour and difficulties. (Check that this is OK with the parents first.)
- Have a pre-arranged place for the child to go to if it all gets too much. The child should also be aware of who he can turn to for support when he is distressed, such as a school counsellor.
- If possible allow the child access to the computer room or library at break times.
- Make a picture schedule of lunchtime activities. One hour can seem like a long period of unstructured activity to a child with autism. Split the hour into segments: 20 minutes – eat lunch, 20 minutes – ball games, 20 minutes – other activities.
- Allow the child 10 minutes of time out after returning from recess or lunch. Give him a favourite activity, time at his special interest or listening to music. Some children might prefer a solo run around the oval; others might like to hide in a box or cupboard, or be 'sandwiched' in between a couple of bean bags.
- Choose a mature child from the class to act as a buddy during recess and lunchtime.
- Use a business card holder the child can keep in his pocket with ideas for conversation starters, activities to try, etc.
- All children in the school should be aware that bullying is unacceptable through a school policy of positive behaviour management.
- A [social story](#) can help children with autism cope in the playground and understand school boundaries.