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Coping with recess and lunch breaks

“A student 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. A child with autism prefers routine, so he is likely to feel stressed or anxious during this time. Normally-developing children use their breaks to release stress and unwind; the student with autism may return to the classroom too stressed to concentrate and participate in any way.
- The child may prefer to withdraw during this time because he is 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. He may have little interest in his peers' conversations about clothes, the opposite sex, the latest fads etc.
- The child will be vulnerable to teasing and bullying, both physical and verbal, during this time. His unusual behaviour and poor social skills make him stand out as an easy target. He might 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 students enjoy playing ball games, the child with autism may avoid doing so due to his lack of co-ordination and poor 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.

What you can do

- Accept that the student 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.
- Incorporate social skills training in class. Have the students act out social situations, such as

how to join in a conversation in various circumstances.

- Teach and encourage the child to practise playground games and ball handling skills.
- Ensure the student clearly understands the rules regarding school boundaries and 'out-of bounds' areas for his own safety. Use a color coded map of the school grounds.
- Help the student develop strategies to respond to teasing and unwanted social approaches by other children.
- Autism is an invisible handicap - a child with autism looks much like any other student making it difficult for the rest of the teaching community 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 student 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 student should also be aware of who he can turn to for support when he is distressed, such as a school counsellor. Provide the student with photo cards/names of staff he can go to when he needs help.
- If possible allow the student access to a resource room, computer room or library at break times. See also [Creating a home base](#).
- Make a picture schedule of lunchtime activities. One hour can seem like a long period of unstructured activity for children with autism. Split the hour into segments: 20 minutes - eat lunch, 20 minutes - ball games, 20 minutes - other activities.
- Allow the student 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 students may prefer a solo run around the oval; others might like to hide in a box or cupboard, or between a couple of bean bags for a period to de-stress.
- Choose a mature student to keep an eye on the child with autism during recess and lunch breaks. Rotate students on a roster system. Some students may need close supervision from their integration aide.
- Use a business card holder the student can keep in his pocket, with ideas for conversation starters, activities to try, etc.
- All students in the school should be aware that bullying is unacceptable through a school policy of positive behaviour management.
- A social story can help students with autism cope with breaks, giving him ideas for activities and helping him understand school boundaries. See [Social Stories](#).