

Understanding difficulties at break time and lunchtime

Free time may be difficult for pupils with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Here, we explain why and suggest some ways in which teachers and other pupils can help. Parents and carers may also find this information useful.

Children and young people with an ASD can have difficulty with communication, social relationships and friendships, and imaginative play. Many like structure and routine because it helps them to cope in an unpredictable world, and for this reason pupils may prefer lessons to free – unstructured – time.

There are several other reasons why free time may prove difficult.

Occasions like lunchtime and break times can be daunting. If you have problems understanding other people's behaviour, find unpredictability stressful, and are very sensitive to sound, lights or smells, what could be worse than a dining room full of children, noise, smells and lots of movement?

Children form friendships and groups during free time. This is a problem for a child with an ASD who may have difficulty developing social skills and understanding jokes and idioms. They may feel intimidated as they cannot read other pupils' body language and find 'social rules' difficult to learn.

These difficulties can lead to isolation and bullying, perhaps also anger and aggression. Most bullying incidents will happen at break times and lunchtime and are not reported to a teacher. Parents may also be unaware of the problem because children with an ASD often cannot, or will not, talk about the way they are feeling, even at home.

What can help?

Pupil awareness

Promoting all pupils' understanding of medical conditions, disabilities and special needs may increase empathy and reduce prejudice, although this must be done with sensitivity.

"Jeff would become very anxious at lunchtime at the prospect of going into the noisy, bustling dining hall. He didn't like to be watched while he was eating. Even at home he would eat in his bedroom if visitors came."

Cumine, 2010



Accept difference. Not indifference.

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For example, you might hold an assembly about diabetes or epilepsy, followed by a bit about ASDs so that pupils learn about several things, without drawing attention to one condition in particular.

A zero tolerance bullying policy

"Bullying may go unreported or may not be properly dealt with. Isolation and loneliness leading to underachievement and even mental health problems is a risk if this is not acknowledged and supported." Gething, 2001

A strong 'no bullying' policy should be enforced and must be consistent.

Incidents must be investigated and pupils should be encouraged to report any kind of intimidating behaviour. Pupils should feel confident talking about any type of bullying they are experiencing; they also need to know that action will be taken.

Be aware that some pupils with an ASD may not recognise what bullying is, if it happens. Therefore, observation in and out of the classroom is vital. Learning support assistants will often notice an incident or hear remarks made by pupils. They should document these and tell relevant staff members about them.

You might tackle bullying by making changes to class seating or talking about problems like verbal abuse in a class discussion or during assembly.

The organisation Kidscape provides a lot of information, resources and workshops on bullying (see 'Useful contacts').

Supervision

"Lunchtime is the most social and least structured time of the school day. For many children that means they can relax

and get a break from the demands of the day. The lack of structure and social nature of recess also makes it the prime time for social conflicts and possible behavioural problems." Baker, 2003

Good supervision during unstructured time is essential – it is a chance to monitor behaviour, too, which is important for pupils with an ASD who may not be able to express their own feelings. Share observations with other staff so that the necessary action can be taken.

A retreat

"It is important to recognise that children with Asperger's often have a real need for solitude." Sainsbury, 2000

A retreat is a safe place for a pupil to go to: a classroom or area recognised by the whole school. It could be a special needs department or a place chosen by the pupil, such as the computer room or library.

However, be aware of how the retreat is seen by other pupils; remember there can be a stigma attached to it. If you find that this is the case, make the whole school aware that the retreat has many functions. It could be, for example, somewhere a pupil can go to get help with homework, or a facility used by pupils to discuss projects. Consider if the retreat could be used before and after school, too.

It can be difficult to know what is best for an individual pupil. Everyone is different and it's important to interact socially, too. Getting to know a pupil, observing them well and making sure that staff communicate with them effectively will help you to decide if frequent withdrawal to a retreat is beneficial.

Someone to talk to

It can really help some pupils with an ASD to have someone to talk to. This may be a 'lunchtime buddy' – a peer who spends lunchtime with a pupil with an ASD, perhaps regularly, perhaps just now and again. The buddy system can also be used during break time or may help if a pupil travels to school by bus.

It is also important that there is an adult available to talk to if there is a need. However, pupils should not become dependent on one person; if that person is absent, they could become more stressed.

Lunchtime clubs

Lunchtime clubs are a good idea, especially if the activity is a particular interest of a pupil with an ASD. Make sure that the pupil is actively involved and doesn't remain alone or isolated.

Music and drama clubs can be especially beneficial. Drama develops pupils' understanding of body language and facial expressions. If they do not want to be involved with acting there are other ways to help, like costumes, make-up, lights or set design.

"The opportunity to watch people use their bodies, faces and voices to express emotions is just too great for our kids to miss." Holliday Willey, 2003

However, be aware that some activities, such as drawing, may help pupils unwind when they're not at school. If you encourage this activity during free time at school, it may feel like an invasion of their personal time or space.

Be cautious of certain lunchtime activities, for example litter picking, which can be seen as a punishment. Pupils with an ASD need structure, but it is important to understand the difference between structured and directed activity.

"The structure needed by children with Asperger's syndrome...refers to order, not control." Sainsbury, 2000

Social skills and self-esteem classes

"Since social skills are an important ingredient in life success, we need to make sure that children with ASD acquire these skills or learn social rules to compensate for what does not come naturally and, as a result, lead successful lives." Baker, 2003

Social skills or self-esteem classes can help to boost pupils' confidence. Classes may not last for long – perhaps one hour a week for six to eight weeks – but can really help pupils to increase their understanding of social situations, interpret social signals and practise skills such as turn-taking and listening.

Social skills resources are available from The National Autistic Society and other organisations such as OASSIS (see 'Useful contacts').

Classes need to be tailored for the pupils who are attending, but here are some activities you might try.

Collect pictures from newspapers and magazines of people showing emotions, such as anger, fear, surprise and excitement, and discuss. This is an inexpensive activity.

Have conversation time. A core set of conversation skills typically needs to be taught before conversation time can run smoothly. These are:

- > maintaining a conversation
- > starting a conversation
- > shifting topics
- > talking briefly
- > editing sensitive topics
- > showing understanding for others' feelings. (Baker, 2003)

Talk about anger management, the 'triggers' and ways to cope with them. Involve the group in finding solutions as this can help to develop pupils' self-awareness. While it is good to have the opportunity to talk about anger management, remember that outside agencies, such as psychological services, have considerable expertise and it may be necessary for a pupil to be referred to them.

It is better to keep social skills groups to a small number of pupils, not necessarily just those with an ASD. Include pupils who are shy, who find it difficult to make friends or who show a lack of confidence. Take care that all pupils have similar needs; this will help to create a supportive learning environment.

Evaluating each session will give a better indication of pupils' needs and you might find it is necessary to spend longer on a particular issue than you expected. Individual education plans (IEPs) can be written for the social skills training and used to monitor pupils' progress.

Social stories™ and the card system

If a pupil is concerned about certain situations, such as what to do during a rainy break time, there are two potential solutions.

The first is to write a social story. This is a short description of a particular situation, sometimes with pictures, with specific information about what to expect and why. Visit www.autism.org.uk/socialstories for more details.

You could also use the card system. Bullet points on a card or in a homework diary give pupils a procedure to follow, including where to go if they feel anxious or upset.

Conclusion

All pupils with an ASD could have problems during unstructured time, but empathy and understanding from pupils, teachers and support staff will help to overcome these difficulties.

It is important to remember that all pupils with an ASD are different and strategies that work with one child may not work so well with others. It helps to be flexible and to review your approach.

We hope that some of the suggestions and ideas given here will help you to support pupils with an ASD at your school.

References

- Baker, J. E. (2003). *Social skills training for children and adolescents with Asperger syndrome and social communication problems*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company
- Cumine, V., Dunton, J., and Stevenson, G. (2010). *Asperger syndrome: a practical guide for teachers*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge
- Gething, S. (2001). *Educational issues in Asperger syndrome*. In Yule, W. (ed.) (2003). *Interventions for individuals with Asperger's syndrome*. London: Association for Psychology and Psychiatry
- Holliday Willey, L. (2003). *Asperger syndrome in adolescence: living with the ups, the downs and the things in between*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Sainsbury, C. (2000). *Martian in the playground: understanding the schoolchild with Asperger's syndrome*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing. Available from: www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop

Recommended reading

Many of the books on this list are available to buy from our website. We receive 5% of the sale price from all the books we sell through www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop

Gray, C. (2001). *My social stories book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available from: www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop

Knott, F. and Dunlop, A-W. (2007). *Developing social interaction and understanding: a resource for working with children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from: www.autism.org.uk/pubs

Stobart, A. (2009). *Bullying and autism spectrum disorders: a guide for school staff*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from: www.autism.org.uk/pubs

Wing, L. (2003). *The autistic spectrum: a guide for parents and professionals*. 2nd edition. London: Robinson Publishing. Available from: www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop

Useful contacts

Education Rights Service

Information, support and advice on the educational rights and entitlements of children with an ASD
Tel: 0808 800 4102
Website: www.autism.org.uk/educationrights

Kidscape

2 Grosvenor Gardens
London SW1W 0DH
Helpline: 08451 205 204
Website: www.kidscape.org.uk

OAASIS

The Croft
Vicars Hill
Boldre
Lymington
Hants SO41 5QB
Helpline: 0800 197 3907
Website: www.oaasis.co.uk

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