

10 TIPS FOR PLAYGROUNDS

Most children go out in the playground to relax, socialise, eat, drink, go to the toilet, run around and come back to class refreshed. Unfortunately for many children with an ASD, the playground is the most stressful part of their school day. For some students we may need to put in structures to help reduce the anxiety of the playground. (This also includes “outside play” in the early years: Preschool, Daycare etc).

First you need to identify **why** the playground is so stressful for the individual student? Here are some examples to get you started:

Sensory – noise of bell, children touching, smell of food/canteen, slow eater, toilets smell, needs sensory activities to relax but nowhere in playground suitable, senses overwhelmed – noise, movements etc.

Social – games and rules in playground constantly changing, want friends but do not know how to make, burn friends out, prefers adult interactions, wants to be on own.

Communication – doesn’t understand other children because of noise, literal so misunderstands children and adults, no visuals to support understanding all oral communication.

Behaviour – unstructured interactions, confused by boundaries/rules, anxiety, anger management.

10 IDEAS TO TRY:

1. **Interests:** Use the child’s special interests. For example: Pokemon, reading, horses, cars, drawing, lego, running etc. Create a space in the playground they can go to do chosen activities. Using their interest enhances social engagement and is far more motivating for everyone. You may need a rule that only three children at a time, or select who can go to this area.
2. **Clubs:** Computer Club, Chess Club, Music, Gardening, Music, etc.
3. **Circuit/Schedule of Activities Using Visuals:** This should also include drink, toilet, line up.
4. **Timers:** Put a Time Timer outside so the students can see how long they have to play. Use a portable schedule with visuals to show activities to do in playground.
5. **Social Stories:** Use social stories to support understanding: How to ask people to play, what to do if they say ‘NO’, what to do if you lose (many of you may have the book “How to Stop your Words from Bumping” – this is full of great social stories).
6. **Teach Social Skills & Understanding:** Use social stories, role play and explanations. Students will not just pick up social skills from peer group, needs to be taught.
7. **Safe Area:** If children have a repetitive action, or an ASD behaviour they do to calm themselves during the break, you may need to designate a safe area for this activity. I recommend within view of a teacher.
8. **Smaller Areas:** Many playgrounds are BIG areas where the rules change depending on the area. For example the oval may have different rules to the asphalt. You may need to just start with one area and teach how to play in that area, the suitable games that are played, and appropriate and allowed interactions. Then add a new area etc.
9. **Shorten Breaks:** The break may be too long. Some children are okay in the first short break, but lunch is too long, so children may need a shorter time in the playground.
10. **Change:** You may need to change activities regularly otherwise they may lose interest.

TOP TIP: Playground Activity Box

Many schools give out physical education equipment (balls, hoops etc) but not all students find these easy activities, as most require good gross motor skills. Put out a box of books, lego, a mat with cars/blocks, dinosaurs, Pokemon cards, box of books, drawing table – these are just a few ideas to get you started. I particularly find this wonderful when children say “I do not have anyone to play with!” you can say “Read a book from the book box.” There is often not just ASD children who are lost/confused at breaks. Having out a range of activities ensures a “meeting point” for these children. It always warms my heart to see two children reading a book together or sitting drawing together who five minutes earlier were upset as they had no one to play with. It is much easier to direct to an activity than trying to find a “child to play with”.

More Ideas: See BOOKS - The Early Years pp 59-66; Making it a Success pp 99-101; Essential Guide to Secondary pg 68.