

Imagine school life through their eyes.....

“We ask huge things of children with an autistic disorder. We send them into adverse environments that are full of people and events, such as schools and shopping centres. We demand social interaction. We want them to join in conversations. We want them to play with other children. We often require them to give up a ritual, routine or obsession which has been helping them to reduce their anxiety. We send them from the structured classroom to the unstructured playground ‘for a break’.

Children with autism have to work even harder in the playground – to make sense of the myriad of rules for social interaction. Playtime or recess is no break unless a structured, predictable recreation routine is developed to support the child with autism. This can and should include a small group of peers who understand the child and have been taught how to respond positively. An autistic child at a school that has set up a small PlayStation room, where one peer per break is allowed to share the activity, has gone from being the bullied outcast to the most popular child in the class! It is important that everyone – parents, extended family, teachers and friends – understand that children and adults with autism are not like average people. They do not think in the same way and they should not be treated ‘like everyone else’.

Choose recreation activities carefully – team games like football or basketball are not overly successful, but individual activities such as tennis, golf, tenpin bowling or chess are more so. Computers, video games and the internet are much enjoyed by many people with an autistic disorder. Careful guidance can ensure they become shared activities in a number of ways – interactive and shared games and programs, chat rooms and special interest clubs. Make allowances for the enormous effort they put into getting through each day – is homework more important than time to recover from a highly stressful day?

Try to imagine what it is like for the person with an autistic disorder to live in our world.”

Dr Richard Eisenmajer

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