

Tips for Food Service Workers and Cafeteria Monitors On Working with Students on the Autism Spectrum

The environment of the cafeteria can be extremely overwhelming for students on the Autism Spectrum due to their hypersensitivity. These students become over-stimulated by sights, sounds, touch, movement, smells, temperature, and/or size of the cafeteria. Below are some tips that may help the autistic student better manage in the cafeteria:

1. Be conscious of the noise level in the cafeteria
2. Allow use of head phones or ear plugs to decrease the noise level
3. Have these students sit in an assigned seat at the end of the row/table to give them more space
4. You may need to define the student's personal space with tape, foot prints, chalk lines or other visuals
5. Have a visual of their cafeteria code if needed
6. To assist with helping students make a choice of food—tell the student what to do such as “pick 1” as opposed to asking them “what do you want to eat” (they may take more than 1 choice in that circumstance)
7. Some students may need assistance carrying their trays or opening up packages
8. Have a visual of the cafeteria rules posted and refer to them as needed
9. Pair these students with good role models and facilitate social interaction when possible
10. Be conscious that these students can be easy targets to be teased and bullied by other students in the cafeteria
11. Have a predictable routine if possible
12. Tell the student what do—such as “sit down” as opposed to asking them “do you want to sit down?”
13. Have a designated quiet/calm down area that students can go to when needed
14. Some students may need to utilize the quiet/calm down area for the above alternate activities
15. Provide breaks when needed—like going in the quiet hall to get a drink
16. Allow the students to have a reasonable amount of movement cafeteria time
17. Allow students to use items that will comfort them draw, doodle, look at books, or another alternative activity when they are finished eating their lunch
18. Watch for signs of escalating stress level—such as rocking, tense body language, escalating voice level—verify you know they are getting upset—reassure them—and redirect them to activities or an alternative place that will calm them
19. Remember that is very difficult for an autistic student to stop a task before it is completed...try giving a verbal warning or give them a directive such as “take one more bite, then throw your trash away” or “3 more minutes to eat, then it will be time to clean up”
20. Pre warn of any known upcoming changes such as shortened cafeteria time or eating a sack lunch in their classrooms
21. Give them extra “wait time” for processing directions—do not continuously repeat the direction
22. Limit your verbalizations when talking directly to these students—use visual or gestural cues when possible
23. Try not to say too much too fast
24. Be direct, calm, and clear with directions
25. Avoid using abstract phrases like “lick your plate clean”
26. Use a calming, reassuring voice for directives
27. Visually demonstrate the activity that the student is to do
28. Refrain from joining in their argument
29. Do not force eye contact
30. Remember many of these students do not act like they are paying attention but they are
31. Recognize that students may be responding from a developmental age rather than their chronological age
32. These students may often times be clumsy
33. Make sure these students know the expectations that we feel are common sense—such as what to do when the bell rings, what will happen if the student is tardy etc
34. The special education teacher of record is your resource for any specific information pertaining to that autistic student.

Remember some of the basic characteristics of a person on the Autism Spectrum:

- These students have difficulty putting themselves in another student's place and seeing other person's perspective
- Have difficulty reading the intentions and behaviors of others
- Have much difficulty with peer interaction
- Have much difficulty with any type of social skills
- Have much difficulty with communication
- May have specific and intense interests
- May have poor organizational skills
- Do not understand abstract language, puns, or innuendos
- Have difficulty with problem solving—when and how to ask for help
- Have a difficult time multi tasking
- These students do not understand “The Hidden Curriculum” which is a set of rules of guidelines that are often not directly taught but are assumed to be known...such as how to dress, how to greet people, the daily schedule, which teachers will tolerate tardiness, if you need to pick your nose—do it in the bathroom and use a tissue etc.