

# Lunch & Transitions

Students with ASD can find transitions and unstructured times with high social demands challenging. Therefore, trained ASD Nest professionals provide the required social and sensory support during these out-of-classroom experiences, including lunch, hallway transitions, locker time, and changes in school schedules.

## Support during lunch:

At any age, Nest students may have difficulty during lunch and recess, due to the challenges related to the unstructured time and possibly overwhelming sensory environments. When Nest students are in the cafeteria for lunch, they continue to receive support from Nest professionals. At least one Nest-trained staff member—a teacher, social worker, SLP, or administrator—is present for the entire lunch period, in addition to the “on duty” school lunch aides or other school staff. During this time, Nest professionals are not lunch aides; they use their experience to proactively provide support for students’ self-regulation, sensory, and social needs. They may help to spark conversations around shared interests, support students’ problem solving, and provide the opportunity for students to take breaks.

## Alternative locations for lunch:

During lunch, options for alternative locations to eat are made available to students. Examples include:

- ❑ Offering the Nest room—or one designated classroom—as an option for students for whom the cafeteria is overwhelming
- ❑ Designating point people or advisors—available during lunch time—whom students can go to if they are experiencing difficulty; have a protocol for students informing these advisors of their plans and informing appropriate staff members
- ❑ Grouping Nest students in a connected but quieter location of the cafeteria in 6<sup>th</sup> grade; each student transitions into larger lunchroom over the course of the year when s/he is ready
- ❑ Holding alternative activities during lunch: student interest clubs, teacher office hours, etc.

## Recess:

If a school holds recess, support by a Nest professional is extended during this time as well. Students are encouraged, but never forced, to participate in games and group activities. Students may need guidance around things such as what types of activities are available, or how to navigate the natural competition in games. Some students may use this time to relax and take a break from the social demands of the school day, and they are given this time to decompress.

## Transitions & changes:

As transitions can be challenging for students with ASD, Nest administration and staff plan for support during these less structured times. For everyday class-to-class transitions, Nest teachers monitor the hallway to ensure safety and provide support for students if they become confused or frustrated. When needed, the Nest team provides the option for student to transition three to five minutes before the rest of the students; this requires planning, team buy-in, and consistent follow-through among all teachers. During changes in school-wide practice—such as assemblies and schedule changes at the semester break—the Nest team establishes a protocol to inform Nest students of such changes ahead of time, to avoid confusion, frustration, and possible meltdowns.

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## **Additional Questions & Considerations:**

### **When should students eat in the cafeteria?**

Sensory and social challenges vary greatly among students with ASD. Some Nest students may feel comfortable in the cafeteria from the beginning of their time in middle or high school. Others may initially need a separate location but can transition later in the school year. And for some students, a large and noisy cafeteria is always going to be an overwhelming—and even painful—environment. Therefore, the student's Nest team, including his/her parents and the student him/herself, make the decision as to if and when a transition into the cafeteria is made.

### **What should students be doing during lunch?**

Whether in the cafeteria or a separate location, Nest students are allowed time to themselves should they need it. However, they should be encouraged to interact with their peers, with support from Nest professionals. Lunch is neither a time for non-stop video games, nor for forced interaction. Nest professionals supervising lunch must strike a balance between allowing students to have solitary down time, and enabling them to be alone at all times. Expectations for the use of a separate location should be established and discussed with all students beforehand.

### **Can general education students use the separate lunch location?**

Lunch is an opportune time for Nest students to foster positive peer relationships. Thus, general education students may be invited to Nest students' alternative lunch locations. However, invitations to other students may need to be restricted: a) consideration must be given to the ability of the Nest professional to supervise the total number students, b) Nest students are given priority, c) inclusion of general students should not impact the quiet, calming environment.

### **What whole-group Nest strategies can be used during lunch?**

Many Nest strategies can be generalized into lunch to support all students. These include, but are not limited to: The 5 Point Voice Scale can be adapted for use in the cafeteria to help address noise levels. Visual schedules can be used to break down steps to cleaning up or a recess line-up routine. Positive reinforcement systems can also be used to reward positive behaviors such as cleaning up lunch tables quickly and lining up without reminders. Language used in SDI can be used to promote generalization. Nest staff members participating in lunch and recess share their knowledge of these strategies with other lunch and recess staff, as many of these supports can benefit all students.

### **Can non-Nest school staff supervise Nest students?**

It is essential that all school staff understand the basic needs of students in the Nest. Staff members such as school lunch aides, safety agents, and administrative \_\_\_ should be provided with an overview of the challenges and strategies of students in the Nest. This training is done in-house, and "Nest-approved" presentations for this purpose are available on the Nest's *Principal's Page*. As these school community members are not fully Nest trained, Nest students are not regularly left under their sole care without support from a Nest professional.

### **A note on the ASD Nest Model:**

This paper outlines an element of the ASD Nest Model. Fidelity of implementation to the model is essential for program consistency. While a degree of flexibility is necessary given individual school needs, the program benefits from schools' commitment to a cohesive model.