

Instructional Lunch

Instructional lunch is a unique feature of the ASD Nest program. Students with ASD can find unstructured times with high social demands challenging; therefore, trained ASD Nest professionals provide the required support during both lunch and recess. For younger students, instructional lunch is held in a separate location. For older students, Nest professionals may facilitate students' transition into the school cafeteria and support them there. Nest students' social and sensory needs are supported during this time of day.

Kindergarten instructional lunch:

Kindergarten Nest students begin the year attending instructional lunch in a separate location, led by a trained ASD Nest staff member (often the ASD Nest cluster teacher). The staff creates a supportive environment where students feel comfortable and relaxed and their social needs are considered. The teachers establish clear and consistent structures and have students frequently practice lunchtime routines. Teachers also support students' pragmatic language, social relational, and problem solving needs in accordance with goals discussed by the team during completion of the SDI Team Planning Map.

Transition to the cafeteria:

After spending time in the separate lunch location, some students may feel ready to eat in the cafeteria. In preparation, the instructional lunch teacher discusses what eating in the cafeteria is like and facilitates the transition. Nest professionals conduct discussions sensitively, with the understanding that many students may have reservations or fears about this change. Some students may be ready to make the transition into the cafeteria later than others. The team plans a structured transition for those students who are ready. For example, the students may first visit the cafeteria when it is empty, then make a visit during lunch, and then start eating there once a week.

Instructional lunch in the cafeteria:

When students are in the cafeteria for lunch, they continue to receive support from Nest professionals. At least one Nest teacher—often the ASD Nest cluster teacher—is present for the entire period, in addition to the “on duty” school lunch aides or other school staff. During this time, Nest professionals 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.

Recess:

Nest professionals support students on the playground, as recess is unstructured and can be overwhelming. Students are encouraged, but never forced, to participate in games and group activities. 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. Students may need guidance around things such as what types of activities are available, or how to navigate the natural competition in games.

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Additional Questions & Considerations:

Which staff members are present at instructional lunch?

Trained Nest professionals facilitate instructional lunch. Oftentimes, ASD Nest cluster teachers run instructional lunch and support the Nest students during recess, generalizing strategies and supports across this and other out of classroom experiences. The Nest speech and language pathologist may also participate in instructional lunch, capitalizing on the less-structured social aspects of this non-academic group time. Occupational therapists may push-in during this time to support students' fine motor skills or to address specific feeding goals outlined on the students' IEP.

Can general education students attend the separate instructional lunch?

A primary function of instructional lunch is to support Nest students socially during the lunch and recess period. At times, this may mean that carefully planned activities take place with Nest students' general education peers. General education peers may also be invited into instructional lunch as part of the planned transition process of students moving into the cafeteria.

When do elementary Nest student start to go to lunch in the cafeteria?

Some Nest students may be ready to transition into the cafeteria at the end of Kindergarten, while others may transition in older grades. There are some Nest students for whom the cafeteria remains overwhelming, and instructional lunch in a separate location continues to be necessary. The student's Nest team, including their parents and the student him/herself, make the decision as to if and when a transition into the cafeteria is made. Some students may express an interest in eating in the cafeteria, which can help to ensure that the transition will not be made before they feel ready. When a class or grade has students attending both separate and cafeteria lunch, staffing must be arranged so that a trained Nest teacher is with all students.

What whole-group Nest supports and strategies can be used in the cafeteria and at recess?

Many Nest strategies can be generalized into the cafeteria and recess to support all students. 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 routines. Positive reinforcement systems can also be used to reward positive behaviors such as cleaning up lunch tables quickly and lining up without reminders. 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.

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.