

# Lesson 5: School, free time

You can read the content of the lesson 5 videos here.

## **Demands at school**

We all have our experiences from when we were in school, but it can be easy to forget how many demands are made of children.

They are expected to sit and listen for long stretches of time at their desks. They're expected to work with subjects they might not always find very interesting. They are also expected to learn loads of different skills and lots of information in several different subjects in one day. They have to take responsibility for their own learning through homework, for example, which begins at a rather young age. They also have to manage frustrations and failures that happen throughout the day, which isn't always easy to find space or time to do. They have to interact and work together with other children who have their own strengths and weaknesses. And they also have to be able to change activities according to predetermined times. Throughout this class, we've talked about how it can be hard for children with autism to make changes and switch activities.

## **What can be difficult?**

We will now go through several examples of things that can be difficult at school for children with autism.

This includes understanding instructions and especially understanding instructions given to an entire group. Remember what we talked about before: the child might find it difficult to grasp what applies to them and what applies to someone else. The teacher might also give an instruction phrased as: "Can you open your books to page 53?" – which is more of a question about whether you are capable of opening your book, and not a direction to do so.

Open work methods or open-ended instructions can also be issues. It isn't exactly clear what to do. For example, if you're going to work on a project, but it isn't clear in what order the tasks should be done. There too, it can be difficult for children with autism to keep up.

You might be instructed to write an essay, but have no specific instruction on how to write it, or on what topic. It can also be hard to know how much to write, for example, or what about.

Asking for help can be difficult. This is related to cognition differences: it is hard to consider what others are thinking and feeling, and their intentions. It can therefore also be hard to understand if someone is able to help you or if it is the right time to ask for help. You might also ask for help too much and disrupt the class.

So it's either too much or too little; you might sit quietly and not get any help at all, and be unable to do your work for that reason.

Then there is the issue of working with things that you might not find interesting. Children with autism may find it hard to understand why they should do something that they don't find interesting or feel motivated to do.

Changes to routines at school can be hard. For example, if there is a substitute teacher or a field day that doesn't follow the usual schedule. These kinds of breaks in the routine can be hard to handle and you might really have to work with them on this by clearly showing, for example with visual support, what changes will take place.

The physical environment can also be stressful. For example, if a light is broken or if a fluorescent bulb is blinking. Maybe the ventilation system is making noise, or maybe the classroom is a little chaotic, with lots of people talking at once. To help with this, placement in the classroom can be important.

Then there is the issue of working with things you don't find interesting. They find it difficult to understand the point of going to school and being motivated to do so. You may need to find something that motivates your child and that they think is fun.

## **Breaks and transitions**

Next we'll turn our focus to things that can be hard at school when it comes to breaks and transitions. For example when moving from one class to another, the entire structure that was there during class disappears. So breaks aren't exactly restorative for children with autism, as a breakdown in the structure can be stressful.

Then there is stopping one activity to start another. If a child with autism has a subject they like, and they have to interrupt it and transition to a different subject that they don't like very much, it can be hard to stop what they're doing.

Just knowing what to do during a break or recess can be hard. Several activities might be going on at once and recesses can be fairly unstructured in general. A lot of unexpected events could also happen at recess, and that may be hard to handle without preparations.

The physical environment can be challenging when making transitions. This is also related to noise and crowding. Maybe above all, the hallways can become crowded and very noisy – people might shout at each other when things are less structured.

Children with autism can have a hard time fitting into conversations and struggle with social codes. This might make them vulnerable to bullying and put them at risk of being used by others, in various situations, to do things they may not want to do.

## Laws and regulations

We will briefly talk about what laws and policy documents govern operations at schools.

The first policy document is the UN Standard Rules. There are 22 standard rules. They describe the responsibilities that member states have at all levels to ensure inclusion for people with disabilities in society and to achieve equality in living conditions. People should have equal opportunities for education at all levels and among all ages. This should be an integrated part of education.

The Swedish Education Act states that consideration should be given to the different needs of children and students. Children and students must be given support and stimulation in order to develop as much as possible. I will explain a bit more about the Swedish Education Act soon.

The curricula consist of five sections. These are: the fundamental values and tasks of the school; overall goals and guidelines for education; the preschool class; school-age educare; and syllabuses with knowledge requirements. There are a total of eight curricula pertaining to children and young people. There is the curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare. There is also a specific curriculum for upper-secondary education.

If you want to learn more about these curricula, you can read about them on the website of the Swedish National Agency for Education.

## Basic adaptations

Basic adaptations can be made for people with basic challenges at school. In general, these basic adaptations might involve needing a clear schedule and clear instructions at school.

The child might also need help with planning and structure for looser work methods or activities. Preparing the child for new situations at school is another important basic adaptation.

Creating a structure for the transfer of information between the school and the child and family is another important adaptation. This could involve information transfer on staff changes, field trips, mood and homework. These basic adaptations also need to be individually tailored. It's important to consider the child's mood on a given day.

It is also important to make adaptations based on the child's sensitivity to stress and perception differences. And it's important to map their strengths, interests and what motivates them. Because if we understand that, we can use that information as an entryway at school when it comes to harder tasks that are more challenging for the child. It could also be good for the child to get to do something they are

interested in or feel good at. This can create space for recovery during the school day for the child.

We've been in the red understanding field, during the beginning of this lesson. Now we'll move on to the purple field. We are going to talk about clarifying questions that may be helpful at school for the child.

Now we will go through a number of questions that are important for all educators at schools to be able to answer if they have a child with autism in class. But in fact, these questions are not only helpful for kids with autism; all kids at school may find answers to these questions helpful.

- Where will I be? The pool (example).
- What will I be doing? You will practice swimming 200 metres.
- Why am I doing that? To see if you meet the knowledge requirement for swimming.
- How will I do that? Your physical education teacher will explain there.
- When am I doing that? This will be on Monday at 10:00 am.
- With whom am I doing that? You will do this with your physical education teacher and the other students in your class.
- How do I ask for help? You can ask your physical education teacher for help.
- How long will I be doing this? We will be there until 12:00 pm.
- What will I do next? After that, you will take the bus back to school with your physical education teacher and your class, and then eat lunch.

## Right to support

Chapter 3 of the Swedish Education Act regulates the right to support at school. It states that as far as possible, all children should have the opportunity, based on their own conditions, to develop as much as possible in accordance with the educational objectives.

If you have a disability that makes it difficult to meet all of the knowledge requirements and requirement levels at school, support should be provided to combat the consequences of the disability.

Extra adaptations are one form of support. These must be put in place promptly if there are concerns that the student is not achieving the school's knowledge requirements, or if they are in fact not achieving them. It is a good idea for the extra adaptations to be documented in the child's individual development plan and for them to be continuously evaluated. Extra adaptations are usually applied within the framework of regular teaching.

Another form of support is called special support. If you have tried extra adaptations and they were not enough, then you should promptly look in to the need for special support.

You may know from the beginning that the student will need special support, and then too, this should be investigated promptly. The need for special support should also be investigated if the child has other challenges, such as social challenges. Special support is often applied over an extended period of time and is more comprehensive in scope than extra adaptations.

## Examples of support

I will now go through several examples of extra adaptations and special support.

If you have a student with autism or some kind of neuropsychiatric disability in class, it is good for relevant staff to receive information and guidance.

For example, they may need general information about autism, as well as more specific information about the specific child. If the child has resources from several different organisations at once, then a network for collaboration may also be helpful. In that case, a coordinated individual plan may need to be drawn up ("samordnad individuell plan" or SIP). Individual adaptations need to be made and there are no limits as to what they might be; this is really about considering the child's needs. For example, this might be sitting closer to the front of the classroom, or getting help taking notes. Maybe they need several sets of the same textbooks.

As I said, this could really be anything. You might need different kinds of educational tools. That could be time management tools, or different kinds of cognitive support. Expanded staff resources could mean having access to a student assistant, or if the student is in upper-secondary school, they might have access to something called expanded mentorship.

You might need to talk to a school counsellor. Some students might need an adapted course of study for a longer or shorter period of time. That might mean a later arrival time in the morning, leaving earlier in the afternoon, or not going to school at all on some days.

Some students may have access to partial one-on-one teaching, which would usually be one-on-one teaching in specific subjects. Some students who are entitled to special support can receive it in a so-called special teaching group.

All students need to be given time and space for recovery during the school day.

## Action plan

If it has been determined that the student needs special support, then more extensive documentation is needed and an action plan should therefore be drawn up.

The action plan should state what the student's needs are and how to meet them. How to follow up and evaluate the action plan should also be stated. It is important to determine who is responsible for evaluating and following up the action plan. The student and parents should all have a chance to take part in designing the plan. The plan should be specific and clear, and you should have an opportunity to ask questions about it.

The principal decides on establishing the plan. In addition to achieving knowledge requirements, the action plan could also be about achieving social goals and combating a high rate of absence.

All primary school students are required to attend school. This can be seen as both a right and an obligation. The school's obligation involves adapting teaching so that the student can learn.

## **Student Health**

The Swedish Education Act also regulates the initiatives of student health services. Student health services has responsibility for all initiatives that contribute to fostering students' learning, development and health. Schools should have access to a nurse, counsellor, school doctor, psychologist and special education teacher or specialist.

This does not mean they must all be present on site, but that the school has access to these professionals.

The principal has ultimate responsibility for student health services. Student health services can refer to other care providers, for example for an assessment or treatment.

## **Upper secondary school**

In upper secondary school, it is natural to give young people more space to take responsibility for their own schooling. But at the same time, we know that the best thing for well-functioning schooling is to continue to have a close collaboration between the school and home, that is, the parents. If schooling will be adapted, it is good to start from the student's schedule, so that you know when it might work to add a break or remedial classes.

You may be able to skip some classes. What classes should you focus on? If your teen does not have grades from all primary school subjects, then the upper secondary programme can be modified to an individualised programme.

Visit [gymnasieguiden.se](http://gymnasieguiden.se)

But this involves how many grades are missing and the teen's motivation. There are also several folk high schools and upper secondary schools combined with housing that are especially intended for kids with autism.

You can google "folkhögskola" (folk high school) and autism.

## **If it doesn't work**

Collaboration between the home and school is a condition for the child's schooling to go well, so try to establish regular transfer of information as early as possible and before any problems arise.

If schooling still isn't going well, then contact the principal or mentor. Ask to receive all information in writing. If you want to submit a complaint or file a report, this should also be done in writing.

Step two if you are not satisfied with the school's response is to contact the responsible authority for the school. That is either the municipality or the board of directors, if it is an independent school. In this case, you should also ask to receive a response in writing.

Step three if you feel your child is not getting the support to which they are entitled, or if you are not satisfied with an action plan or decision on special support, for example, then as a final resort, you can submit a complaint to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate or to the Board of Appeal for Education.

The Board of Appeal for Education primarily addresses action plans or decisions on special support and placement for interventions.

The Swedish National Agency for Education has a service line for these issues. Phone number: 08-527 332 000.

## **On free time**

Meaningful free time is important for everyone. Free time gives us space for rest and recovery, but hopefully, we also have some fun in our free time.

It's good for your child to get to choose what they want to do in their free time, and if they have the chance to develop, grow and build confidence.

But some things can prevent meaningful free time. For example, having restricted interests. A special interest may very well be limited. So consider how to address this.

Maybe the child can have the chance to further develop their limited interest in their free time.

One such thing might be screens. But remember, screens can often offer rest and recovery, as well as a chance for people with autism to create social connections.

They are also a way to search for information, for example on their special interest. Research has shown that people with neuropsychiatric disabilities run a greater risk than others of getting hurt online, so it's important to pay attention to how things are going online for your child. You can read more about this at [www.natkoll.nu](http://www.natkoll.nu).

Something else that could prevent meaningful free time could be what we've talked about before: resistance to trying new things. It isn't necessarily a lack of interest in new things; it could be a lack of motivation, or feeling more secure with things they've done before. Maybe they just don't want to, or don't have the energy to try new things.

People with autism also have a particularly significant need for recovery, so keep this in mind when considering free time. Perhaps your child actually needs to rest more than others in their free time. You can also consider what is energising and what is draining for your child, and maybe also for your whole family.