



# Creating a COMFORTABLE CAFETERIA PROGRAM

Creating a Comfortable Cafeteria is one of several model programs developed as a part of an Ohio Department of Education (ODE) funded project entitled *Every Moment Counts: Promoting Mental Throughout the Day* (see [www.everymomentcounts.org](http://www.everymomentcounts.org)). The focus of this initiative is to embed strategies throughout the day to help all children and youth become mentally healthy in order to succeed in school, at home and in the community.



## About the Comfortable Cafeteria Program

This six week program was developed by occupational therapists (OT) to be embedded during lunchtime with the purpose of creating a positive cafeteria environment so that all students can enjoy their meal and socialize with friends. The ultimate goal of the 6-week program is to provide the cafeteria staff and students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources needed to sustain a comfortable cafeteria environment.

## What Does the Program Involve?

This is a six week, one day per week, program embedded into the cafeteria involving a combination of education, short activities, and OT coaching.

- **Educating** cafeteria supervisors, school administrators, teachers and students about how to create a positive mealtime environment using a variety of strategies including an orientation session, newsletters, posters and bookmarks.
- **Embedding weekly activities** one day per week for 6 weeks by an occupational therapist in order to encourage children to have meaningful conversations, demonstrate positive behavior and mealtime manners, and be a good friend.
- **Occupational therapy coaching** with cafeteria supervisors to model positive social interaction with students, help problem solve behavior challenges, and suggest embedded mealtime activities.

## WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Children love the Comfortable Cafeteria Program because of the positive adult attention and fun activities designed to help them enjoy their meal and conversations with friends.

## Developed by Occupational Therapists (OTs), but Implemented by All

Although the program is lead by OTs, it requires the support and participation of cafeteria supervisors, school staff, administration, students and families. Why OT? Occupational therapists are skilled in knowing how to help individuals participate successfully in their daily activities, including mealtimes, by enhancing skills or modifying the environment or the activity. An important aspect of this program is to ensure that all students with and without disabilities and/or mental health challenges are fully integrated into the cafeteria environment and are able to participate and enjoy mealtimes and social interaction with peers. OT's analyze the social, emotional, physical and sensory aspects of participation in order to make the modifications needed for successful participation.<sup>1</sup>

## Why is this Program Needed?

When the cafeteria environment is pleasant, students eat more of their lunch, do better in their academic work, have fewer behavioral problems, and feel more connected to their school.<sup>2</sup>

**For students,** lunch should be an enjoyable part of the school day to:

- Relax and take a break from classroom work
- Become nourished, learn healthy eating habits, and try new food
- Socialize with friends and learn how to be a good friend
- Learn appropriate mealtime behavior and manners

**For cafeteria supervisors,** lunchtime is an important time to interact with students in positive ways and encourage healthy eating and social interaction. Unfortunately, cafeteria supervisors are generally not given the education and support needed to do their jobs effectively.

## Guiding Principles (based on current literature)

1. Create a positive mealtime environment, which includes having adequate time to eat (20 minutes) and a cafeteria that is comfortable, attractive, clean and safe.<sup>3</sup>
2. Provide recess before lunch. Studies indicate that students are more relaxed, better behaved, and eat more of their lunch when recess occurs prior to eating.<sup>4</sup>
3. Create a positive social climate, by encouraging pleasant mealtime conversations and friendships. Emphasis is on creating an environment where all students, including those with varying abilities, feel welcomed and respected.<sup>5</sup>
4. Promote healthy eating habits.<sup>6</sup> Students learn about and have opportunities to eat healthy foods.

## Weekly Themes

**Week #1:** Kickoff: Let's get started! Student orientation to the Comfortable Cafeteria program. Students receive bookmark and learn about mealtime manners and how to behave in the cafeteria. Posters hung. Cafeteria supervisors learn how to promote positive behavior.

**Week #2:** It's time to talk about friendship and how to be a good friend! Students learn qualities of a good friend and how to make and be a friend. Supervisors learn about conversation starters and tips.

**Week #3:** Let's learn about mealtime conversations and meet our 'Special Guest'! Students practice conversation starters and tips with a special guest. Supervisors encourage positive mealtime conversations.

**Week #4:** Mixing up the lunch tables and including others. Using conversation skills to interact with someone new. Students use conversation cube to talk to a new peer. Supervisors encourage making new friends.

**Week #5:** Just come to your senses! Understanding the sounds, tastes and smells in the cafeteria. Students learn about the impact of sensory input by tasting, smelling and listening. Supervisors learn how sensory input impacts behavior and how to create a sensory friendly environment.

**Week #6:** Let's make friends and healthy food choices! Students learn about healthy eating and try nutritious foods with friends at their table. Supervisors learn how to encourage healthy eating and positive social interaction.

## Project Outcomes

Preliminary findings from survey data indicate that the Comfortable Cafeteria program results in students perceiving supervisors as more friendly, becoming more aware of lunchtime rules, and learning how to be friends with others. By the end of the program, cafeteria supervisors feel better prepared to interact socially with children, promote positive behavior, successfully resolve conflict, and encourage healthy eating. Supervisors report applying new knowledge and skills during all lunch sessions in the school.

<sup>1</sup>American Occupational Therapy Association. (2013).The Cafeteria: Creating a Positive Mealtime Experience. Retrieved from: <http://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/Practice/Children/Cafeteria-Mealtime-Info-Sheet-10-30-13.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Blum, R. (2005). *School Connectedness: Improving the Lives of Students*. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland.

<sup>3</sup>Center for Ecoliteracy. (2010). *Rethinking school lunch: A planning framework from the center of ecoliteracy*. [http://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/rethink-ing\\_school\\_lunch\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/rethink-ing_school_lunch_guide.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, (2010). *State of play: Gallup survey of principals on school recess*. Retrieved from: <http://www.rwjf.org/files/research/stateofplayrecessreportgallup.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Heyne, L., Wilkins, V., & Anderson, L. (2012). Social inclusion in the lunchroom and on the playground at school. *Social Advocacy and Systems Change Journal*, 3, 54-68.

<sup>6</sup>Alliance for a Healthier Generation. (2014). The Healthy Schools Program. Retrieved from: <https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/>

## VISION STATEMENT

Our school will provide pleasant and positive mealtimes so that all students will enjoy eating food and socializing with friends and adults.

## TEN STEPS TO SUCCESS

1. **Know your stuff.** Read annotated bibliography on cafeteria best practices.
2. **Observe lunchtime** to get a feel of the challenges and needs of supervisors and children.
3. **Meet the relevant stakeholders** - cafeteria supervisors.
4. **Develop a plan of action.** Decide what grade level and what day of the week to implement the program.
5. **Make a case.** Obtain principal buy-in and support. Summarize assessment findings and program details.
6. **Sell the program.** Share marketing brief with school staff, students, and families before the kick-off.
7. **Kick off the program.** Orientation to cafeteria supervisors and students.
8. **Just do it!** Implement the six week program!
9. **Reinforce the message** with follow-up support and monthly newsletters.
10. **Do it again!** Replicate the program in other grades. Spread the joy!

For further information:

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