Occupational Therapy's Role in Mental Health Promotion, Prevention, & Intervention With Children & Youth

The Cafeteria: Creating a Positive Mealtime Experience

OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE

How might the cafeteria influence Occupational Performance? Occupational therapy practitioners and cafeteria staff can work together to create a positive cafeteria environment in order to help students with:

Social participation

- Learn appropriate mealtime behaviors and manners (e.g., talk at an appropriate volume, chew with mouth closed, clean up after lunch).
- Learn appropriate social behaviors (e.g., how to initiate conversations, appropriate listening skills).
- Prevent social exclusion and bullying of other students.

ADL (Eating)

- Enjoy eating lunch in the cafeteria.
- Eat more lunch.
- Learn healthy eating habits and develop a positive relationship with food.
- Eat at an even pace and without hurrying.
- Use utensils and napkins properly.
- Learn to advocate for one's sensory needs in order to feel relaxed during lunch.
- Independence in selffeeding

Education

- Be ready to concentrate and learn in the afternoon.
- Feel positive about and more connected to school.

Sleep/rest

 Feel rested and restored for the rest of the school day. **OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS** use meaningful activities to help children and youths participate in what they need and/or want to do in order to promote physical and mental health and well-being. Occupational therapy practitioners focus on participation in the following areas: education, play and leisure, social participation, activities of daily living (ADLs; e.g., eating, dressing, hygiene), instrumental ADLs (e.g., preparing meals, shopping), sleep and rest, and work. These are the usual occupations of childhood. Task analysis is used to identify factors (e.g., sensory, motor, social—emotional, cognitive) that may limit successful participation across various settings, such as school, home, and community. Activities and accommodations are used in intervention to promote successful performance in these settings.

THE CAFETERIA: A place to enjoy a meal and socialize with peers. Lunch should be an enjoyable part of the school day for students, offering a break from classroom work and a place to relax, socialize, and become nourished. Mealtimes in the cafeteria can also be used to promote healthy eating habits and encourage children to try new foods. The cafeteria, especially in elementary schools, can be one of the best contexts where appropriate social interaction and behavior is modeled and taught. It is important for supervising adults to interact with students in positive ways without resorting to strict discipline. Learning these skills in the early grades can potentially help prevent more disruptive behaviors in the cafeteria in later grades.

Consider the cafeteria a place to embed services. Occupational therapy's scope of practice includes eating/mealtimes and social participation. As such, it makes sense for occupational therapists to embed services in this natural context, with a focus on helping create a positive cafeteria environment, so that all students can enjoy their meals and socialize with friends. Lunchtime is a naturally occurring, nonacademic time of day for social and emotional learning (Heyne, Wilkins, & Anderson, 2012).

Team collaboration is essential. Building a positive cafeteria climate is a team effort that includes administrators, teachers, cafeteria supervisors, food service personnel, students, and parents.

Challenges in the cafeteria. School cafeterias may not be pleasant environments if students are not allowed to talk during meals and feel pressured to eat. Disruptive behaviors and bullying in the cafeteria can spill over into the classroom. Also, the pressure to eat fast may hinder making good food choices and cause more food waste.

Benefits of a pleasant cafeteria experience. When the cafeteria environment is pleasant, students eat more of their lunch, do better in their academic work, and have fewer behavioral problems (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2010).

PROFESSIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Educate cafeteria supervisors and students. In the beginning of the school year, provide inservice education and follow-up coaching to cafeteria supervisors on strategies for creating a positive cafeteria experience. Help supervisors learn what to say and do to create a calm and comfortable environment. Provide a short inservice to students in the beginning of the school year to educate them on appropriate mealtime behavior, manners, and ways to make mealtimes pleasant.
- 2. Promote positive mealtime behavior. Provide information to cafeteria supervisors on strategies for promoting positive behavior and mealtime manners, and handling problem behaviors. Implement preventive programs based on positive behavioral interventions and supports. Clearly posting rules may foster good behavior. Have students work together to clear and wipe the tables and sweep underneath so that the next group of students has a clean space to eat. This teaches respect for others.
- **3. Foster enjoyable social interaction.** Consider providing round tables with chairs instead of rectangular tables with benches to decrease the number of students in a space, giving students a less crowded more social place to eat. Encouraging inside voices and signaling when noise levels get too loud helps promote a calmer, more pleasant environment.
- **4. Promote good nutrition and a healthy relationship with food.** "A growing body of research connects better nutrition with higher achievement on standardized tests; increased cognitive function, attention, and memory; and an array of positive behavioral indicators, including better school attendance and cooperation" (Center for Ecoliteracy, n.d., p. 5). Use lunchtime as an opportunity to teach students about eating healthy foods.
- **5. Modify the environment.** Designing the cafeteria to look more like a café, with décor promoting healthy eating, may make it more inviting. Make sure the cafeteria is clean and free of clutter. Staggering classes so that everyone does not show up at once may decrease the amount of time students spend in line, giving them sufficient time to eat lunch.
- **6. Hold recess before lunch.** Provide recess before lunch so that children come to lunch ready to sit down, eat, and socialize. Holding recess before lunch has been shown to encourage eating at a slower pace and decreases food waste (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2010) This also gives students a chance to calm their minds and bodies before sitting down to lunch.

continued



Occupational Therapy's Role in Creating a Positive Cafeteria Environment

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS can serve an important role in promoting a positive mealtime experience at the universal, targeted, or intensive levels of intervention.

Tier 1: Universal, whole-school approaches focus on promoting a positive cafeteria environment.

- Get everyone on board! A positive cafeteria environment and healthy eating habits should be a school-wide initiative involving all staff, students, and parents. Form a committee of parents, students, and school staff to create a shared vision and action plan for improving lunch.
- Educate and support cafeteria staff. Provide an inservice at the beginning of the school year on creating a positive cafeteria experience. Offer follow-up coaching to provide ongoing support and problem solving regarding challenges.
- Be creative in suggesting ways to make lunch an enjoyable experience. For example, create fun ways for cafeteria staff to interact with students (e.g., "silly hat day," joke of the day).
- Schedule recess before lunch. Studies have shown that holding recess before lunch improves food and milk intake and cafeteria behavior, and decreases discipline referrals (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2010).
- Ensure adequate time to eat. Students should have 20 minutes of seat time to eat lunch so that they are not hurried.
- Schedule lunch between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.
- Physical environment: Consider increasing the number of lunch periods in order to decrease the number of children in the cafeteria at any given time. Arrange traffic flow in the cafeteria to make sure children move in clear smooth patterns to access food items and assigned seating. Make sure the cafeteria is a clean, safe, and attractive place (e.g., colorful posters, flowers on table). Provide hand washing supplies like hand sanitizer at convenient places so that students can wash hands before eating. Ensure that tables and chairs are the right size for students.
- Sensory environment: Implement strategies for minimizing noise (e.g., educate students on using a conversation voice and only speaking to students at the table; use a visual signal to communicate when the noise level gets too high). Softer table coverings and floor surfacing may cut down noise levels. Ensure that tables and the floor are kept clean to cut down on odors. Avoid "eat in silence" rules, whistles, or buzzing traffic lights that monitor sound levels
- Social environment: Encourage cafeteria supervisors to make students feel welcome and show a personal interest (e.g., call them by name, smile). Develop clear rules that outline expected cafeteria behavior and teach these to the students during the first 2 weeks of school. The rules should be posted and reviewed regularly. Consider using round tables to encourage conversations during meals. Help students engage in pleasant conversations during lunch and include all peers at the table. Teach and reinforce mealtime manners (e.g., chewing with mouth closed, eating correctly with utensils, using a napkin to wipe mouth).
- Encourage and reinforce healthy eating habits. Collaborate with the nutrition services staff and health educators to promote healthy eating and weight.

Tier 2: Targeted strategies focus on accommodations for students at-risk of experiencing challenges in the cafeteria.

- Pay attention to students with disabilities to ensure they feel welcomed, comfortable, and included in the cafeteria.
- Attend to the sensory needs of students at risk of sensory processing challenges. Teach students to develop
 self-calming strategies as needed to help them feel calm and safe in order to eat their meals. Students who are
 hypersensitive to auditory, visual, tactile, and/or olfactory input may feel more comfortable eating in a quieter, less
 distracting section of the cafeteria or in a classroom with a small group of peers.
- Educate cafeteria support staff about signs of sensory overstimulation (e.g., putting hands over ears, rocking, avoiding interaction) and teach strategies for reducing sensory input and responding to students' emotional needs.
- Consider eating at a table with students if there are issues related to social interaction and/or behavior. Adults can help model social inclusion, positive manners, and appropriate mealtime conversation.

Tier 3: Intensive:

- Develop a lunch bunch group program to bring students with and without disabilities together to share lunch and a recreational activity (Heyne et al., 2012). The occupational therapy practitioner can facilitate such groups on a weekly basis.
- Embed social and emotional learning strategies in the cafeteria to help students with behavioral challenges interact positively with peers and make friends (Fenty, Miller, & Lampi, 2008).
- Collaborate with the cafeteria supervisors to develop an individualized behavior support plan for students demonstrating significant behavioral challenges during lunch.
- For students with significant sensory defensiveness, create a "sensory-friendly" space in a quiet corner of the cafeteria with calming music. In addition, communicate with cafeteria supervisors and caregivers about possible sensory strategies for helping students cope with overstimulating food environments both in and out of school to ensure consistency across settings.
- For students with physical disabilities and feeding challenges, the occupational therapy practitioner can advocate for the student to have added time to eat their meal as needed to foster and encourage independence in self-feeding.

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RECIPE FOR A COMFORTABLE CAFETERIA:

- Students feel safe, welcome, and valued.
- Students have choices and are not pressured to eat.
- Students have enough time to eat (20 minutes of seat time).

(Stenberg, Bark, Emerson, & Hayes, n.d.)

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH

"To create an inviting dining ambience that encourages healthy interaction and healthy eating— a place that students enjoy, that makes the lunch period a time they look forward to, and that helps them feel safe and valued at mealtime."

(Center for Ecoliteracy, 2010)

CHECK THIS OUT!

Rethinking School Lunch: A Planning Framework From the Center for Ecoliteracy (second edition; 2010). This guide provides a holistic planning framework based on a positive vision of promoting healthy children ready to learn. It provides ideas and resources on all facets of school lunch, including promoting healthy eating, wellness policy, teaching and learning, the dining experience, waste management, professional development, and marketing and communications. http://www.ecoliteracy.org/ sites/default/files/uploads/rethinking_school_lunch_guide.pdf

FoodPlay Productions (http://foodplay.com). This Web site was developed by an Emmy Award—winning nutrition media company that tours the nation's schools and uses live theater and interactive resources to help children adopt healthy eating and active lifestyles. It provides free resources, such as How to Build a Healthy School Environment! (2008), a handout of 30 enjoyable ways to create a healthy school. http://foodplay.com/oldsite/downloads/FreeMaterials/healthy_school_environment.pdf

Montana's Comfortable Cafete-

ria. This website provides ready to use resources and training materials (webinar, posters, videos, and handouts). Retrieved on September 25, 2013 from http://www.opi.mt.gov/Programs/SchoolPrograms/School_Nutrition/MTTeam.html#gpm1_7

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