



Comfortable Cafeteria

Week #3 Lesson Plan: Mealtime Conversations!

Theme: Making mealtime conversations meaningful! Helping students engage in developmentally appropriate conversations.

The overall aim of the Comfortable Cafeteria program is to help *all* students have a meaningful mealtime. This occurs when students enjoy eating their lunch together and giving full attention to each other. Lunch is a special time during the school day for students to relax and enjoy talking with friends. Engaging in pleasant mealtime conversations helps students feel good about their time in the cafeteria and offers them an opportunity to connect with friends and make new friends.

Knowing how to engage in a meaningful conversations is an important life skill – one that students can practice at home with their family during meals. It’s important for adults in the cafeteria to help teach all students the importance of developing conversation skills by modeling positive conversations and offering activities to foster positive communication and sharing.



Goals:

1. Students learn about how to have a positive mealtime conversation and practice conversation skills with each other.
2. Cafeteria Supervisors learn about how to model and teach mealtime conversation skills.
3. Older students or adults model appropriate conversation skills. During Week 3 or 4, a ‘Special Guest’ visits the lunch period so that students can practice their conversation skills. If there are enough high school students or adults to attend lunch, it may be possible to have one ‘special guest’ sit at every table of students.

Special Guest Activity: A ‘Special Guest’ is brought in to the lunch period to talk with students **during Week 3 or 4**. *Be creative!* **Who?** This guest could be the principal, mayor, school staff member (e.g. nutritionist, coach), or community leader (e.g. chef, artist, musician, sports figure, etc.). Some schools have had high school students attend lunch and sit with one table of students. Consider high school students who can be good role models for younger students and discuss issues related to transition to high school (e.g. how to get involved in clubs, deal with peer pressure, etc.). This type of experience might count toward ‘service hours’ if this is something required by the high school. Consider handing the [‘Special Guest’ Flyer](#) around the school (include date, time and place) to generate interest. **What?** The role of the Special Guest is to introduce her/himself and what they do. The students are given an opportunity to ask the guest questions about what they do (e.g. What is your favorite thing about your job?) and appropriate personal questions (e.g. Do you have children? What do you do for fun?)



Materials:

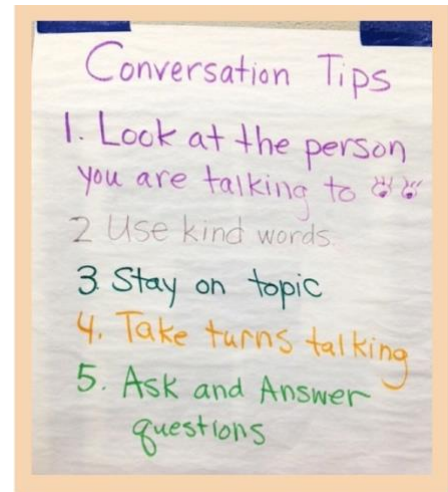
- Poster board or newsprint to be hung on cafeteria wall
- Tape
- Markers

Handouts for Supervisors & Teachers:

- [Coaching Conversation Tips for Supervisors](#)

Handout for Students:

- [Conversation Starters for Students](#)



Action steps for occupational therapist (OT) and other staff leading the program.

➡ WHAT TO DO BEFORE Week #3's session:

1. **Special Guest preparation for Week 3 or 4.** Plan ahead about 2-3 weeks in advance. Invite 1 or 2 special guests to spend lunchtime in the cafeteria. Encourage them to eat with the students for part of the time. Research indicates that when adults eat with students, there is a reduction in behavior problems. Students learn appropriate mealtime manners from adults.
2. Write date, time and place onto the "Special Guest" poster and hang this in the cafeteria and classroom.
3. Have the date and time of the Special Guest announced on morning announcements.
4. Earlier in the week, ask students or ask teachers to explore with students what appropriate questions that might be asked in order to get to know the "Special Guest" better. Refer to the *Coaching Conversations Tips for Supervisors* handout. Give a copy to the teachers.

➡ DURING Week #3's Cafeteria Session – The facilitator (OT or other staff) is present during lunch; introduces the topic of mealtime conversations. (include the Speech Language Pathologist whenever possible!)

1. Review information from last week on friendship. Ask students if they recall what was discussed about what makes a good friend; how to make new friends; how to keep old friends).
2. Introduce the theme of **mealtime conversations** – how being able to hold a conversation during a meal is an important part of having enjoying your meal. Also, talk about mealtime conversations as a life skill that will be used throughout life – e.g. going out on a date, business lunches, etc. Refer students to the [Conversation Starters for Students](#) handout. Summarize some of the basic guidelines: look at person, stay an elbow's length away, talk about



topics only once, use good listening skills, take turns talking, etc. You can write the answers on a poster paper.

3. Introduce the **Special Guest** and have him/her say a few words about themselves. Then, ask students to ask the “Special Guest” questions they’d like to know the answers to. Students need to raise their hand and be called on.
4. When the activity is complete, ask students what they already knew about the ‘Special Guest’, what *new things* they learned, and what was the most *surprising* thing they learned about the ‘Special Guest’. Talk with the students about how asking appropriate questions is a way to learn about another person and make a new friend. E.g. “When you get to know someone better do you feel as though they become more of a friend.”
5. Going forward encourage students to interact by asking each other questions. Remind them that they will have an opportunity to use this lesson again during Week 4. Let them know that they will have an opportunity to sit by someone new!

Tier 2 and 3: Tune into students who appear to struggle to make friends and/or carry on mealtime conversations. Consider the following strategies:

- Complete Attwood’s *Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule* and/or Attwood’s *Observation Schedule*. Consider the student’s strengths and challenges (see Week #2 lesson plan). Provide individual feedback and/or coaching if possible.
- If there are several students who struggle, consider developing a **Lunch Bunch** with approximately 6-8 students with and without disabilities. Refer to Week 2 lesson plan and resources.
- Consider eating your lunch at a table that has a student or students who struggle with being included. Model how to include everyone in a conversation with verbal prompts, such as, ‘What do you think about that, Mary?’; ‘Tim, what do you do for fun after school?’; etc.

Variations for lower & upper elementary:

Lower elementary: In addition to teachers formulating questions to ask and topics to discuss, have them role play scenarios with students on how to have a conversation with their special guest star.

Upper elementary: Discuss the quality of the conversation (i.e. listening skills and reciprocity) and/or have other special guests within the community discuss careers to address social skills needed as adults. Discuss the differences of having a conversation with an adult versus a peer.

Refer to the [Cool Café program materials for information and strategies relevant to middle school students \(grades 5-8\)](#).

Reinforce Week #1 and 2’s themes and content. Continue to explore:

- Volume Control Strategies – help supervisors find what works.
- Promoting friendships



- Continue to demonstrate and encourage positive interaction with students. Smile, call them by name, show an interest. **Learn 1 new name every day!**
- Touch base with the cafeteria supervisors at the end of the session. How do you think it went? What did you observe? Do you have any suggestions? Introduce the theme for Week 4 – using conversation skills to make a new friend; respecting differences; and including others.

Congratulations on completing Week #3 of the Comfortable Cafeteria Program! Move on to Week #4!

References:

Snow, C. E., & Beals, D. E. (2006). [Mealtime talk that supports literacy. *New Directions for childhood and adolescent development*, 111, 51-66.](#)

Scoville, A. M. (n.d.) *Mealtime Matters*. Forever Families. <https://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/mealtime-matters>

University of Purdue Center for Families. *Family Meals spell S-U-C-C-E-S-S (one page fact sheet on the importance of family mealtimes)* https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/cff/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/pfm_spellsuccessfactsheet.pdf

Developed by Louise Demirjian, MA, OTR/L, Fran Horvath, OTR/L, Lauren Baird, MOT, OTR/L, & Susan Bazyk, PhD, OTR/L for *Every Moment Counts* (2014). Revised 2021. www.everymomentcounts.org