



Comfortable Cafeteria Program

Week #5 Lesson Plan: Just Come to Your Senses! Understanding Sensory Input and Personal Preferences

Theme: Students learn about sensory input in the cafeteria and its influence on how they feel; explore sensory preferences and aversions; and learn to respect sensory differences.

Eating lunch in the cafeteria exposes students and supervisors to a variety of sensory input – the smell of food, the sound of many people talking, the sight of a lot of students in one room, and even the touch associated with handling foods. The focus of Week #5 is learning about sensory input and how it influences how we feel and function. Students reflect on personal likes and dislikes and become aware of respecting differences.

By experiencing different flavors, textures and smells students learn that the foods they eat and smell can influence how they feel and function. Food can be alerting (e.g. crunchy, spicy) or help them relax (e.g. sipping hot coco, eating pudding).

Goals:

1. Students learn about the different types of sensory input in the cafeteria (auditory, olfactory/smell, visual, taste, touch, proprioceptive, vestibular, interoception) and reflect on their personal reactions.
2. Cafeteria supervisors learn about the sensory aspects of cafeteria/lunch and learn how to tune-into and respond to students' individual responses.
3. Students continue to think about mealtime conversations and being a good friend.

NOTE: Occupational therapists have specialized knowledge and skills related to sensory processing, sensory processing disorder,s and intervention. Please seek out the occupational therapist at your school if you are concerned with how a student is reacting to sensory input (e.g. hyper-reactive - cries, becomes agitated with certain input, avoids everyday types of input such as sounds, touch, etc. or sensory seeking.).

Materials:

- OT or other program facilitator brings in a variety of food with varying sensory qualities (examples)
 - pretzels for hard/crunchy, salty (alerting)
 - raisins - chewy, sweet (may be calming)
 - graham crackers - soft/crunchy and sweet
 - spicy nacho chips – crunchy/spicy
- Program facilitator may bring in calming music to play in the background
- Poster board or post-it paper, tape, markers
- Paper plates for sampling foods at each table, napkins



Teach them about 3 additional senses:

6. Proprioception (input from your muscles and joints that helps you know where your body parts are and where you are in relation to the environment)
7. Vestibular (tells you about movement and your position in space)
8. Interoception (the senses we receive internally that lets us know how our body is feeling inside such as when we're hungry (growling stomach), when we are feeling tired or sick, or when we need to go to the bathroom)

2. **Explore personal reactions and differences.** Ask, "what types of sensory input seems to be the strongest in the cafeteria" (should answer – sound, taste, and smell). Ask, "raise your hand if you like loud noises"; "how many of you like spicy foods?" We all respond to sensory input in our own unique ways. Sometimes certain input might make us feel uptight or on edge; other input might help us relax. Ask students for examples. It's important that we understand that people experience sensory input differently – and to respect them.

3. **Today we're going to taste and smell different foods and think about how they make us feel.** On your table are some samples of foods with different textures and tastes. Pass the plate around to your friends at the table, taste each one and think about whether you feel like the food made you more alert/awake or relaxed. Do this with each food. Ready?? Begin!" (Let students sample and discuss for 5 minutes)



Suggested discussion: Gain the attention of the students. Make two columns and ask which foods fall

under the awake/alert column and record on Poster board. Ask students which foods fall under the relaxing column and record on Poster board.

Tell students, "The temperature of food can also change how we feel. Any thoughts about warm foods/drinks versus cold? Which is calming and which is alerting based on temperature, frozen popsicle? hot chocolate?"

Have children smell certain foods, like vanilla yogurt or cinnamon sticks. "Now, I am going to walk around with some different foods or spices and will ask you to sniff. Smells can also change the way we feel. Think about how the smell makes *you* feel." For example:

- Vanilla-sweet-calming
- Cinnamon- spicy-can be both
- peppermint

Gain the attention of the students. Ask under which column Vanilla, peppermint, and cinnamon should fall (Awake/alerting or Relaxing/calming).



Ask “What would Peppermint be?? (Alerting) Can anyone guess why you are allowed to suck on a peppermint candy during testing?” (It’s alerting and can help you do your best work.)

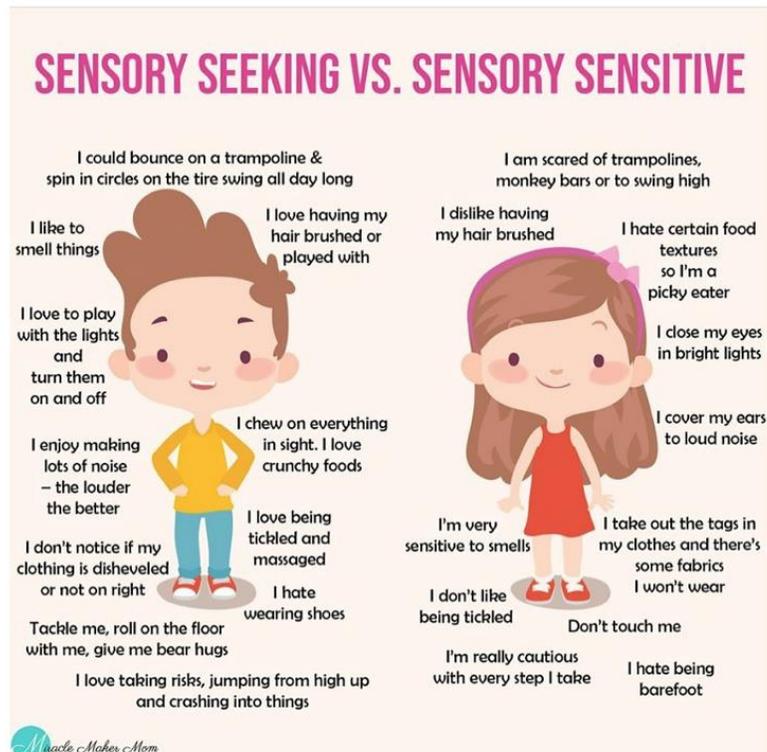
Ask “Can anyone tell me why drinking plenty of water during the day is also important? Here is fun fact: The human brain is made up of 78% water! So if you haven’t had enough to drink you can’t do your best thinking!”

Say “Food flavors, textures and temperatures can influence how we feel. If you are looking for a certain taste or texture to match or **change** your mood **choose the healthiest food available** (pretzels vs. chips, graham crackers vs. cookies, a sour green apple instead of pop rocks, Salsa instead of Hot Tamale candy, etc).” Say “Non-food choices such as gum, hard candy or chewing on a straw or pencil, for example, can help us feel calmer or more alert and focused throughout the day, not just during meal times.”

4. **Model respect for sensory differences.** Solicit cafeteria supervisor’s observations of children. Also, ask supervisors how they respond to a noisy environment – does the noise irritate them? Problem-solve solutions.

Tiers 2 and 3: The OT should observe all students and note any sensory seeking behaviors (e.g. excessive movement, stuffing mouth with food, rocking in chair, inappropriate touching of food), or sensory avoiding behaviors (e.g. putting hands over ears, unexplained irritability, avoiding touching or eating certain foods, etc.).

Consider how to adapt the environment or make accommodations for a particular child or small group of children with the same or aversions. E.g. Arrange for students who are hyper-sensitive to auditory input to sit at a part of the cafeteria with the least noise or commotion; arrange for students who need more movement to take on work tasks at the end of lunch (e.g. wiping down tables, collecting garbage).



From Sensory Store website. <https://sensorystore.nado.org.au>



Upper Elementary students

Introduce the Three Hidden Senses: Consider asking, “What are the 3 Hidden senses?” Share with students about proprioception & vestibular sensory input:

1. *Deep pressure/Body position/Proprioception*

Pushing and pulling, lifting and carrying with our muscles and joints helps us become relaxed and alert. Even when we are in our classroom we can use chairs to do chair pushups or palm presses to “wake up our arms and body” to help us attend.

Calming: The deep pressure from the hug of someone we love can be especially calming.

Walking around with a weighted backpack or wearing Lycra clothing can also be calming.

Alerting: Light touch such as tickling with feathers can be alerting, especially if you don’t expect it.

2. *Movement/Vestibular*

We feel calming effects when we experience slow and rhythmical movement like what we experience on a slow porch swing. This is relaxing to us. If we are on a roller coaster, traveling up and down, side-to-side in an unpredictable pattern we are very alert and attentive.

Calming: This includes swinging rhythmically on a swing, rocking on a chair, swaying or dancing to gentle music, riding a bike, and Ferris wheel rides can have a calming effect.

Alerting: Bouncing on a therapy ball, running, playing hide and seek or games of tag, cart wheels, summer salts, jumping rope or jumping on a trampoline, and many others are alerting to the brain.

3. **Interoception.** Some children and adults with conditions such as anxiety, autism, trauma, or sensory processing challenges, have a difficult time recognizing the internal functioning of the bodies (i.e. interoception) resulting in emotional challenges. [Kelly Mahler, OTD, OTR/L](#), has developed strategies for improving interoception using mindful self-regulation.^{4,5} Refer to Kelly’s website for further information and to purchase her books and webinars (www.kelly-mahler.com).

Tune Into Emotional Eating: Sometimes what we eat can *reflect* the way we feel.

Ask: “Who can tell me what they like to eat when they are **happy**?” Write down answers from the students. (Pizza, steak, ice cream, cake....?)

Ask: “Who can tell me what they eat or feel like eating when they are **sad**?” Write down answers from the students. (ice cream, cookies, candy?.....)

Ask: “What about when you are **bored**? Write down answers from the students.” (Chips, pretzels.....?)

If it’s been less than 3 hours since we last had a meal and we are craving foods we might be emotionally eating. To take care of our emotions instead of feeding our stomach when we are not really hungry, we can try these strategies:

1. Keep a journal about when and where we are when we stress eat. It could be at home, in the evening, on the weekend, when alone.
2. Once you figure out when you eat to reduce stress, replace it with something healthy like a sip of warm milk or a foot massage, which can lower your heart rate and stress level. Breathing deeply is another way to trick your body into relaxing rather than thinking it’s hungry.



3. Close your eyes. Stare at the blackness of your eyelids. Slowly breathe in and out. Count each time you inhale and exhale. Continue until you count to 10.

Reinforce themes and content from Weeks 1- 4 as needed. Continue to explore:

- 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 6.

Congratulations on completing Week #5 of the Comfortable Cafeteria Program! Move on to Week #6!

References & Resources on the Senses and Sensory Processing:

Your 8 Senses. STAR Institute. <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/your-8-senses#f8> – provides a description of the 8 senses including interoception.

An Introduction to the 8 Sensory Systems. Sensory Processing Explained (website).

<https://sensoryprocessingexplained.com/an-introduction-to-the-8-sensory-systems/>

Sensory seeking vs. sensory sensitive. Sensory Store (website). <https://sensorystore.nado.org.au/sensory-seeking-vs-sensory-sensitive/>

Interoception. Refer to Kelly Mahler’s website, books, and webinars at www.kelly-mahler.com

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