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Modification of the Comfortable Cafeteria Program to Foster the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

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Modification of the Comfortable Cafeteria Program to Foster the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Abigail Barnette OT/S, Caitlin Valentine, MOT, OTR/L, and Susan Bazyk, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Background & Purpose

School lunchtime is an important context within a child's day to develop social skills, build relationships with peers and adults, and improve physical, mental, and emotional well-being (AOTA, 2013). Despite the importance of lunchtime, many students, especially those with disabilities, face challenges in the cafeteria due to:

- Time constraints
- Noise levels
- Interactions with peers and adults

Various programs aimed to address lunchtime challenges have been successful, however, students with disabilities may still struggle with inclusion and participation during lunch. The **purpose** of this capstone was to design and implement a modified version of the current Comfortable Cafeteria program that focuses on the distinct need of students with disabilities in relation to lunchtime (Bazyk et al., 2018).

The capstone was completed in partnership with Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) in Cleveland, Ohio. The Modified Comfortable Cafeteria Program was implemented with Kindergarten through 5th grade students with low-incidence disabilities at Charles A. Mooney and Tremont Montessori School.

- Low-incidence disabilities: students with a visual and/or hearing impairment, a significant cognitive impairment, or an impairment that requires personnel with highly specialized skills and knowledge (IDEA, 2004).

About Me

I am a Cleveland State University Occupational Therapy Doctorate student graduating in May 2023. I am passionate about promoting mental health and well-being throughout the lifespan through engagement in meaningful activities.

Capstone Presentation



Capstone Activities

My capstone experience was guided by the following activities:

- Research on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care strategies to embed within the modified program
- Designing and implementing the Modified Comfortable Cafeteria Program at Charles A. Mooney and Tremont Montessori School (1x/week, 8 weeks)
 - Themes:
 - Week #1: Introduction
 - Week #2: Emotional Regulation
 - Week #3: Get to Know Each Other!
 - Week #4: Respecting Difference & Inclusion
 - Week #5: Understanding the Senses
 - Week #6: Healthy Food Choices
 - Week #7: Friendship Promotion
 - Week #8: Bring It Together!
 - Includes added suggestions for addressing the sensory, emotional-learning, physical, cognitive, and environmental needs of students with low-incidence disabilities
- Incorporation of peer mentorship within the Modified Comfortable Cafeteria Program
- Assist with CSU Every Moment Counts (EMC) elective course
- Dissemination to EMC Community of Practice and CMSD OTs
- Producing binders and/or granting electronic access of modified materials for CMSD OTs
 - 16 OTs requested access to materials (electronic and/or binder)

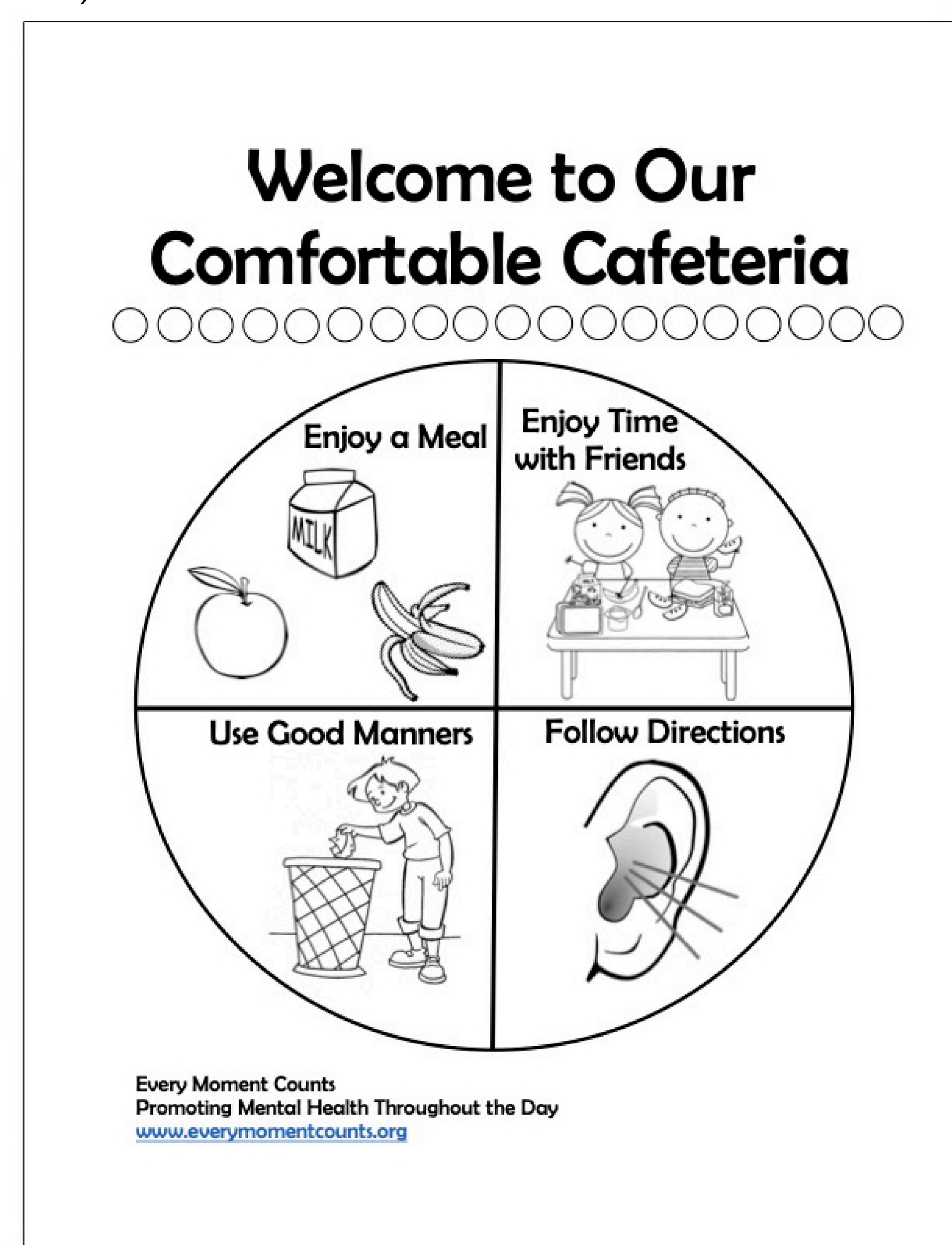


Figure 1. Modified coloring page from Week #1 of the Modified Comfortable Cafeteria Program.

Outcomes

The Modified Comfortable Cafeteria had several successes and challenges:

- Successes
 - Improved student attitudes following lunch
 - Increased social engagement amongst peers
 - Increased voluntary participation amongst the groups as program progressed
 - Promotion of self-help skills and self-advocacy
 - Relocation of lunchtime at Charles A. Mooney
 - Modeling of appropriate supervisor-student interactions
 - Positive response to peer mentorship
- Challenges
 - Supervisor buy-in and carryover
 - Unpredictability (i.e., attendance)
 - Limited weeks incorporating peer mentorship

Implications for OT

- Addressing the inclusion of students with disabilities during lunchtime can be beneficial to promote mental health.
- The Modified Comfortable Cafeteria is a Tier 3 approach, therefore increasing the ease and probability of implementation for OT practitioners.
- Peer mentorship can be beneficial to promote inclusion, although it is recommended peer mentors be introduced early in the program to foster the development of lasting peer relationships.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my Doctoral Capstone Coordinator, Karen Keptner, PhD, OTR/L, for assisting me throughout the capstone process and to the CSU OTD Program for providing funding to support my capstone activities.

Key References

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