Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Lunchtime Clubs in Schools: An Initiative to Increase Social Inclusion

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

Introduction

This tool is an introduction to lunchtime clubs in schools that can be established to help students at risk of or experiencing social isolation in the school setting. Lunchtime clubs are an initiative to help students interact with their peers in traditionally unstructured times of the school day.

This tool has been developed because educators and school staff want ideas for supporting students who are struggling to socialise with peers in the school setting. Young people who have less social and communication skills often struggle to form natural and authentic social networks with other students at their school. Research indicates that young people living with disability are at increased risk of social isolation and exclusion, especially in schools. It is the responsibility of schools to intervene early so that every student feels they genuinely belong to that community and have acquaintances and friends across their schooling years.

Lunchtime clubs are one initiative that schools can utilise to assist students to be successful and valued members of their school community.

Ideas

Lunchtime clubs are utilised for students at risk of or experiencing social isolation when students express an interest in friendships but are having difficulty making friends, or when a student is bored at lunchtime and is seeking something to do. Lunchtime clubs may also be considered when school staff believe a student might benefit even if they have not expressed an interest. In particular, research suggests students on the autism spectrum may try socialising with others more when provided with sufficient motivation to do so[[1]](#footnote-2). In this case, lunchtime clubs provide motivation for the student on the autism spectrum by enabling them to engage in a particular interest of theirs at lunchtime. Lunchtime clubs may also be used by schools with special education settings wanting to facilitate social opportunities and encourage interaction between students in the special education and general education settings.

Lunchtime clubs should not be used when a student is adamant that they prefer being alone at lunchtime, either engaging in a solitary activity such as reading or simply enjoying a break from social interaction. Forcing such a student to engage in a lunchtime club may cause tension between the student and school staff/peers, as well as denying the student their right to self-determination by selecting how they wish to spend their lunchtime.

The premise of lunchtime clubs is providing students with opportunities to socialise with peers at lunchtime in a structured environment. Therefore, they should not be used to focus on curriculum areas or teaching skills that the school deems necessary for students to learn. Lunchtime clubs need to be centred on the interests of students.

Lunchtime clubs may or may not be peer-led depending on the age and capacity of the students, the activities, the venue/location, and other such factors. The judgment of school staff is required to determine whether a lunchtime club is peer-led, staff-led or a combination of the two.

# *Benefits of Lunchtime Clubs*

Lunchtime clubs are an opportunity for students to have fun and interact with peers, including peers from different year levels, who have similar interests and passions. Lunchtime clubs are known to create benefits for students on the autism spectrum. For example:

* Improving social skills, even when no other social intervention is used[[2]](#footnote-3)
* Increased friendships, although whether participation leads to friendships or friendships lead to participation is unknown[[3]](#footnote-4)
* Promoting peer social acceptance[[4]](#footnote-5)
* Creating feelings of happiness for both the participants on the autism spectrum and their peers[[5]](#footnote-6)

It is likely that these benefits are applicable to students with other disabilities and/or other sources of vulnerability that place them at risk of social isolation.

In addition to the above list, the Inclusive School Mentors for this project reflected upon their own experiences at school and identified the following benefits of lunchtime clubs for students experiencing social isolation at school:

* Engagement in teamwork, co-operation and collaboration
* Opportunity to increase interests, knowledge and skills
* Increasing feeling of safety whilst at school
* Decreasing loneliness
* Learning social cues and opportunity to practice social skills

Lunchtime clubs may also benefit school staff by providing opportunities to work with different age groups, share their talents and skills, and get to know students outside of the classroom.

Actions

Activities for Lunchtime Clubs

Lunchtime clubs are an initiative that schools can use to address social isolation and exclusion, and support at risk students to interact with peers with the support of school staff. The first point of action is determining the activity that the lunchtime club will be focused on. If the school has a specific student that the lunchtime club is designed for (referred to hereafter as the ‘target student’), then the school will first need to identify the interests and hobbies of that student. For a student living with disability, this information should be listed on the student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) (if not the IEP form needs to be updated to include this information). Regardless of whether the student has a disability or not, school staff could also ask the student directly about their interests, as well as the students’ siblings and parents where appropriate. If the lunchtime club is targeting a group of students, school staff may need to spend more time or utilise different methods, such as surveys, to identify common interests among the students.

Interests and activities for lunchtime clubs are wide-ranging and are limited only by imagination and creativity. Some of the activities currently run as lunchtime clubs in Australian schools include Auslan signing, yoga, chess, knitting, gardening, craft, cooking, music, gaming, animation, choir, coding, reading, and sports.

Planning Lunchtime Clubs

When planning lunchtime clubs for students, it is important to consider factors that may determine the most appropriate day and setting of the lunchtime club. Some factors may be specific to the target student. For example, if the target student has more energy and/or motivation to socialise with peers at the start of the week then it may be best to hold the club on a Monday or Tuesday. Other factors may be relevant to the target student’s peers. For example, if the club involves physical activity then it might be best to hold the club on a day that participating students do not have after-school sport or physical education lessons.

Other factors might be specific to school staff and yard duty allocation. The location of lunchtime clubs may need to be where there is a teacher on yard duty if no extra staff members are available to supervise/support the club. Alternatively, some staff may volunteer if it fits in with their timetable and is an activity or group of interest. For example, an art teacher might use the lunch period on Tuesdays to prepare her classroom for the afternoon class. This teacher may be willing to supervise a club as an extra duty provided it is in the art classroom and does not disrupt their preparation.

# *If the Target Student Lives With Disability*

It is important to note that while the target student for lunchtime clubs can be a student living with disability, the focus should not be on the disability and the student’s peers should not necessarily be informed who the target student is and that they have a disability. Students should simply be told the school has decided to create a lunchtime club for any students interested in a particular activity. The decision of whether to disclose a student’s disability to other group members should be determined by the student and their parent/caregivers (if appropriate) with careful consideration of all relevant factors. This also means that the lunchtime club should go ahead as scheduled even if the target student is absent or does not want to join in on a particular day. All group members should feel a sense of belonging to and ownership of the lunchtime club.

Reflection Questions

The following reflection questions can be used by schools to determine whether a lunchtime club may be helpful for a student or group of students and what should be considered in the planning process:

1. Does your school have a student (or group of students) who is currently socially excluded or is at risk of being socially excluded?
2. If yes, has the student (or students) expressed interest in creating and maintaining friendships and/or a desire for an activity to participate in during lunch break?
3. If yes, what are the interests and hobbies of that student (or students)?
4. Of the previously identified interests, what might other students also be interested in that could be run as a lunchtime club?
5. What are some ways you can find out about a student’s interests?
6. What other factors does your school need to consider when planning the lunchtime club?

The following case studies have applied the information in this tool to show how lunchtime clubs can be set up for students with diverse abilities, strengths, and needs. This is designed for use as a handout in staff meetings, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), or individual settings with staff to explore lunchtime clubs as an initiative to increase social inclusion.

**Handout 1: Lunchtime Club Case Studies**

Alison

Alison is a year 3 student at a public primary school. While she has expressed interest in making and maintaining friends, she currently has none at school. She enjoys and is talented at drawing. Alison’s parents are divorced and she spends one week with her Mum followed by one week with her Dad. The day Alison changes between houses is Friday. The school and Alison’s parents have noticed that Alison tends to be anxious on Fridays, possibly because of the changeover.

Knowing all this information, Alison’s teacher had the idea to create an art club at Friday lunch for Alison to engage with peers. Next up was considering where to the hold the activity and how to supervise it. Alison’s teacher did not have capacity and no other staff member volunteered to run the club. The decision was made to hold the art club in the library where a teacher was already on duty. The school ensured the supplies for the art club were kept in the library so the teachers on duty only had the extra duties of handing out the supplies to the club and ensuring club members packed them away at the end of lunch. The art club was open to students from years 2, 3 and 4 to join; this was to enable Alison to form friendships with similarly aged peers and ideally with students in her class. School staff were delighted when Jason, another student living with disability in year 3 who was socially isolated joined the art club and started socialising with peers.

Luke

Luke is a year 10 student at a Catholic high school. He is on the autism spectrum, having been diagnosed when he was young. He is interested in sporting results and sports strategies, though he has no interest in playing sport himself. Luke struggles to engage with peers and has often been bullied at school. He has frequently stated to school staff on yard duty that he is bored during lunch and would like something to do. Despite encouragement from staff, Luke has made a few acquaintances but none that have become friends.

Knowing this information, Luke’s school has decided to start a tipping competition and results analysis club based on the Australian Football League (AFL). At this school, the P.E. teacher who also coaches the school football team expressed interest in running the club provided it was not held on Wednesday, the day the teacher has few free periods. The AFL club was held on Thursdays, which enabled group members to discuss what changes they would make to teams prior to the official team list coming out. As an incentive for students to join and participate weekly, the school decided to turn the team announcements and tipping into a competition by buying a small prize for the winners. The AFL club was open to students in years 10, 11, and 12 (senior school years) and the P.E. teacher encouraged some of the school’s senior football team players to join.

Kate

Kate is a student living with intellectual disability in her last year at an independent primary school. She likes Thomas the Tank Engine. Kate spends her lunchtime talking to staff rather than peers and she often follows whoever is on yard duty around. Kate has said she would like friends to play with at lunch. In this case, staff at the school know that setting a club around Thomas the Tank Engine would likely mean that only younger peers attend the club. They speak with Kate and her family to identify Kate’s other interests and discover that Kate likes drama. The high school she will be attending next year was deliberately chosen so that Kate could get involved in the whole school theatre performance.

Knowing this information, the Principal and Head of Inclusive Education make plans for a drama club focused around improvising scenes. The best place for the drama club is the school hall. However, it is out-of-bounds for students during lunch and no teacher has capacity for extra yard duty shifts. Instead of giving up, they identify the yard area that has the fewest students during lunch and one day a week, that yard area is used for the drama club. The Principal and Head of Inclusive Education swapped yard duty shifts with other staff members to ensure they could supervise this yard area and the drama club. This allowed the Principal and Head of Inclusive Education to encourage participation by all club members, provide feedback, and ensure a safe and fun club environment. Kate would often suggest scenes for the group to use and ended up taking on a leadership role in the drama club supporting younger members to participate.

The Principal at Kate’s primary school informed her future high school about the drama club and the benefits it has delivered for their students. The high school is now planning to create a club that discusses aspects of the school play (e.g., characters, setting, costume design, etc.) that will be open to all students who are interested in the play.

School-wide

A public R-12 school has noticed that a number of students across multiple year levels are not engaging socially with peers and are alone at lunchtime. Some teachers are concerned about these students and have raised this with the Deputy Principal. Several of these students have expressed desire to have friends to hang out with at lunchtime. Not all of these students live with disability and some are new to the school. The staff ask these students what they are interested in and discover they have a wide variety of interests with little in common.

The school responds to this by offering one or two different activities per week as a lunchtime club. The schedule of activities is set at the start of term and again midway so students have advanced notice and can decide whether they want to participate. Where possible, the students suggest and vote on the activities. The older students are sometimes appointed to run activities, and this helps develop their leadership and facilitation skills. Staff have also sought ideas about appropriate activities from the school’s Out of School Hours Care team. To share the workload, the staff rotate who is running the club each week and the schedule ensures staff have enough notice to plan and prepare. The location of the club is varied depending on the activity. They find that there is a core group of students who attend the club every week, and other students attend some of the time depending on the activity/activities on offer.

More Information

The Inclusive School Practices Toolkit contains other tools for social inclusion that can be used in conjunction with lunchtime clubs such as ‘Circles Methodology for Schools’ and ‘Introduction to Peer Mentoring for Schools’. Have a look through the catalogue and see what may suit your students and school context.

For some students, initiatives to increase social inclusion such as lunchtime clubs may be insufficient and a more targeted approach will be needed to increase social skills. Schools may wish to consider other interventions and initiatives for such students including:

Comic-strips <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx>

Embedding social skills in curriculum <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/>

Peer-led social interventions <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275329940_Developing_the_social_skills_of_students_with_disabilities_through_peer_tutoring_Implications_for_inclusion>

Social stories <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/social-stories>

Video modelling <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/video-modelling>

Many schools operate lunchtime clubs and have information about their clubs on their websites:

<http://www.elthamnorthps.vic.edu.au/lunchtime-clubs/>

<https://darwinhigh.nt.edu.au/student-life/lunchtime-clubs/>

<https://www.gwsps.vic.edu.au/lunchtime-clubs>

Acknowledgement

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5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)