

LUNCH BUNCH

As students with autism become more and more included in general education settings, it is often apparent that their social skills require attention. Inappropriate social behaviors are often exhibited in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, recess playgrounds, etc. These same children also rarely have the opportunity to experience direct instruction of social skills under the typical curriculum, setting the stage for continued and long-term difficulties in these areas. Teachers everywhere have addressed direct instruction of social skills in a variety of ways, including in-class groups, pull-out modes, and one-on-one instruction, small groups of disabled children and small integrated groups. Also, teachers have used a variety of curricula to assist them in the selection of objectives that are used in the instruction session. The EARC School-Age Program itself has long used the various techniques designed to address social skills, and the Inclusion Project has an overall foundation of emphasizing social skills.

The Lunch Bunch as implemented by Debbie Griffith at Mt. Bethel Elementary School in Cobb County Georgia is a program which is based on small group instruction, and provides students with autism the opportunity to practice social skills in a small group setting under direct supervision, but without losing valuable Regular Education class time. The Lunch Bunch always has a facilitator which can be any adult familiar with the students: Inclusion Coordinator, Regular or Special Education teacher, para-professional or school counselor/psychologist. The Lunch Bunch is currently used by many teachers in the EARC/Cobb County Inclusion Program as well as other counties and has proven very successful in addressing appropriate and inappropriate social skills.

The facilitator should begin to familiarize the students with this concept by explaining the Lunch Bunch to all the students in a chosen classroom ahead of time (a classroom that has a student with autism). It should be presented as an exciting opportunity for them to “get together” with their friends or classmates, to “have lunch to discuss a chosen topic”, or to “have a mini-party”. Every effort should be made to get the student’s enthusiasm high for participation. They should also be told that at the end of every Lunch Bunch, all of the students will be getting a very small prize or treat.

Prior to implementation of Lunch Bunch:

Prior to implementing the Lunch Bunch, the facilitator should conduct a social skills assessment on each student with autism selected for participation in the program. Examples of assessment instruments include Skillstreaming (by Research Press), the Walker Social Skills Curriculum (by Pro-Ed), or the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment (by Singular Press).

The results of these rating forms will guide the selection of objectives for each child, and help the facilitator to organize the structure of the Lunch Bunch.

Structure of Lunch Bunch:

At the beginning of each Lunch Bunch, the facilitator should ask the target student to choose 3 (or 4) friends to participate. Teachers have used many methods to choose these 4 children, including rotation, placing names in a jar and having a child choose 4 names, choosing the first 4 students who have their finished, etc. Whichever way is chosen it is important to make sure that all students get a chance to participate, as many typical peers, as well, need assistance in developing appropriate social skills.

The Lunch Bunch is best conducted in a secluded setting, away from distractions. Students should first proceed to the cafeteria to get their trays, but then all should proceed to the designated classroom or any other unoccupied room or area (i.e., adult conference room, media center, playground, etc.) While the students eat, the facilitator can run games or promote interactive conversations around a specific topic which targets the chosen social skill objective. (Included with this handout is a list of suggested games and social goals). An excellent procedure for the Lunch Bunch has been to introduce the chosen topic, allow the students to discuss the topic (with monitoring by the facilitator), and, when the students have finished eating their lunches, to conduct a small group game. At the end of the Lunch Bunch and before the students return their trays, the facilitator should give out the small treat to each child (stickers, edible treats, smiley faces, McDonald's-size prizes, certificates, etc.). This will help to keep the children excited about the Lunch Bunch, and will encourage others to want to attend.

Each target child should participate in the Lunch Bunch once a week. In settings where the facilitator has several students with autism (for example, an inclusion coordinator in a Demonstration

site), then she should rotate the students as quickly as possible by having a Lunch Bunch every day (of course, this will depend on staff availability).

A selection of games and goals are listed below. Teachers may find other games that may prove helpful in conducting the Lunch Bunch, as it is important to eliminate burn-out when playing the games. They are as follows:

The Who, What, Which, Why, Where, and When of Lunch Bunch Social Groups

Why Lunch Bunch?

In a nutshell, the Lunch Bunch program has been used as a part of the Inclusion Project for many years to provide children with autism opportunities to practice social skills. We use Lunch Bunch in our inclusion projects to teach age-appropriate social skills and facilitate interaction. Lunch is used because...

1. Lunch is an ideal time to encourage interaction between a child with autism and his/her peers.
2. Lunch is when children converse between one another and are naturally social.

3. There are no worries about pulling children during an academic portion of the day.

Which social skills need to be targeted for Lunch Bunch?

In our Inclusion Project we target social skills listed on the IEP. These social skills were identified as an area of need by the *Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment* (Singular Press-Thomason Learning), a normed social skills rating form. The IEP goals guide the activities of the Lunch Bunch and create objectives to be facilitated. *Initiates conversation with peers in informal situations, cooperates with peers in group activities, listens while others are speaking, gains peers' attention in an appropriate manner, and invites peers to play or share activities* are typical Walker McConnell items we address during Lunch Bunch.

Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child (Research Press) is another rating form. The *Skillstreaming* rating form is not normed and works as a social checklist or inventory. Peer relation social skills listed in the *Skillstreaming Checklist* include: *beginning a conversation, playing a game, offering help to a classmate, and suggesting an activity.*

Both of these assessments have adolescent versions.

Speech therapists have their own assessments to identify pragmatic skill weakness. Speech IEP pragmatic language goals are another way to isolate social skills to be targeted in Lunch Bunch. Examples of some items on a pragmatic skills observation checklist, *Pragmatic Communication Skills Protocol* © 1988 (Academic communication Associates): *establishes a speaker, uses gestures appropriately.*

Informally observing the child with autism during social interactions will generate additional goals to target during Lunch Bunch. Does he/she talk about age-appropriate topics? Does he approach other children appropriately? Can he/she talk about a variety of topics (rather than only discussing a particular topic of interest)?

Whether formally or informally assessing a child's social skills, there needs to be IEP social skills goals. By listing social skills on the IEP we are establishing an agenda for all who work with the child to follow and creating a "ruler" to measure success.

Some examples of IEP social skills goals...

Short term objective 1: Given a visual prompt (e.g., my turn card), student will physically pass an object in a turn-taking activity (e.g., hot potato, ball) with age-appropriate peers.

Short term objective 2: Given a visual prompt(e.g., topic card from conversation jar), student will initiate a conversation with a classmate by using an age-appropriate question.

Short term objective 3: Student will gain a peer's attention by using age-appropriate and socially appropriate verbal language (e.g., "excuse me", "hey, Jane").

Remember the rule of writing good IEP goals- they must be observable and measurable!

When and **Where** do we need to have Lunch Bunch?

I am often asked how often should Lunch Bunch be held and how much social skills practice a child with autism needs a week. The more a skill is practiced, the better we become with it! So the answer is the more often the better, but because of the reality of the school schedule, two to three days a week maximum, is suggested. Problems that face the "when" of Lunch bunch include: how long the lunch line takes (remember, not all students bring a sack lunch), the time it takes for students to carry their trays to the Lunch Bunch site, the Lunch Bunch Facilitator's schedule (she needs a lunch break too), and the time it takes to return trays to the cafeteria. The reality of lunch time chaos takes time away from the Lunch Bunch session.

The best solution to many of the various lunch time problems is for the Lunch Bunch Facilitator to get lunches and prepare for the Lunch Bunch. When exploring scheduling for the lunch bunch, look at options that will "free up" the facilitator for 15 minutes before and after lunch.

The **where** of Lunch Bunch also causes some logistical problems. Lunch Bunch needs to be in an empty room away from distraction. In our Inclusion Projects we use an empty copy room or therapy room and call it "The Rainbow Room". The Rainbow Room is ideal, the student see it as a fun place and we can keep our games and materials in the room's cabinets. Not every school building can have their own Rainbow Room. Access to a speech therapist's room or testing room is recommended. Going back to the student's empty classroom has its pros and cons. On the pro side, the students may be more comfortable in familiar surroundings and valuable time is not wasted going back to class (they are already there). One of the cons is that if the class returns from the cafeteria early, the Lunch Bunch can be completely disrupted.

What types of games and activities do you want during informal social groups?

Games that don't eliminate players Children with autism are less likely to learn social skills if they are the first player out of a game.

Games that are interactive Some board games and bingo games (unless modified) may not be a good choice to address social skills.

Games that are cognitively appropriate for all players Games with numerous directions and high level problem solving skills may produce more stress than fun. Games can be modified for lower level students by playing with partners, using visual cues, cutting out steps, etc.

Games that target social goals

“Heads up, 7 up” is probably not a good activity choice for a child working on eye-contact. Candyland may not be a good choice if you are targeting social communication goals.

Games that are quick

Because of academic demands that students can engage in social activities is brief. Therefore, games that can be played in relatively short period of time are preferred. There are more social skills to address when games are played to completion such as dealing with losing and congratulating others on a “good game”.

Games that four players can play

Favorites such as Battleship and Connect Four are highly motivating, but if planning to facilitate a group, two players are not going to be appropriate.

Games that other kids play

Games created to teach social skills (found in behavior and therapy catalogs) may not be good choices. They tend to have no object to the game and they require a lot of adult facilitation. We want our kids to play games that other children play, so choosing games found at Walmart or Toy R Us is a better choice.

Games which are not academic

Academics may be a source of stress for children with autism. They may have specific academic difficulties and/or not be functioning on their peers grade level. Because we want to focus on social skills, leaving the “learning games” for center time, etc.

Games that don’t involve numerous pieces

Children with autism may get preoccupied or disorganized with games that require pieces/parts such as Cootie, Don’t Break the Ice, or Don’t Spill the Beans. Also, these games require too much time to set-up which takes away from game playing time.

Games that take turns

Games such as Hungry, Hungry Hippos, and Ants in the Pants do not involve certain skills such as “waiting your turn” and “deciding who is to go first”. These types of games often cause chaos and may not be a good choice.

Who do we want in Lunch Bunch?

- ❖ **Typical Peers.** The reason why we have Lunch Bunch is for the child with autism to be able to imitate appropriate behaviors and social skills from peer models. Children with delayed social skills tend not to display appropriate social skills to imitate.
- ❖ **Age-appropriate peers.** We want the children with autism to be imitating the behaviors of children their own age. Just because a fifth grade child with autism is developmentally low and likes Thomas the Train doesn't mean he needs to socialize with younger children. We want his interests and social skills to be more age-appropriate; that is why he is in Lunch Bunch.
- ❖ **Classmates.** We want our kids to practice interacting with children that they have a chance to socialize with at other times in the day. We want our kids to generalize their Lunch Bunch social skills to the regular classroom, cafeteria, and playground. They are more likely to spontaneously engage in the learned social skills with the same students that they practiced the skill.
- ❖ **A facilitator.** A speech therapist can facilitate the Lunch Bunch to address the child's pragmatic speech goals. A special education teacher or paraprofessional can also facilitate the Lunch Bunch. When hunting for a facilitator look for (1) someone who can fit the Lunch Bunch into their schedule (2) someone who is knowledgeable about autism (3) someone who can facilitate the child to interact with his/her peers. Often a special education consultant or lead teacher can create the Lunch Bunch routine and goals for a paraprofessional to follow. If this is the situation then the supervising special education teacher must create a system of availability to troubleshoot and provide feedback to the paraprofessional.

A list of what should be set up before beginning Lunch Bunch...

1. A permission slip to go home with all of the students in the classroom explaining that there will be a fun program that will be addressing social skills during lunch. Because the Lunch Bunch group is chosen by lottery, their child may attend only once a month at the most. We have an area to sign at the bottom of the slip "if you do not want your child to be apart of the Lunch Bunch Program, lease sign and return" which makes the process simpler. I have included a sample permission slip.
2. The "Friends Jar". Have each student in the classroom write their name on an index card. Allow a variety of markers and other simple art material so that each student can decorate to personalize their name card. Students can also draw a picture of themselves on the card or a digital camera can be used to further personalize the name cards. Place all name cards in a container and name it a positive friendship title such as Friends Jar, Classmates together Box, or First Grade Friends Jar. The jar can be used for a variety of classroom activities so you

- may want to refrain from calling it a Lunch Bunch Jar. The Jar can also be used to choose project partners, collaborative learning groups, center time groups, and Friends Club (discussed with recess buddies). One kindergarten teacher used the Jar to draw names during Friend's Friday for social activities.
3. For a student with a visual schedule, a Lunch Bunch picture card should be created. Using the index cards from the Friend's Jar to place by the visual schedule will create a visual reminder of with whom the student with autism will be eating lunch. It will create excitement for the whole class as well. For students who do not need a visual schedule, a Lunch Bunch schedule should still be established. For example, Lunch Bunch is on Mon., Wed., and Fri., or is on the same day as speech therapy, PE, or computer. Having a structured schedule will lessen confusion for the student with autism, as well as the whole class.
 4. Writing a Social Story (Carol Gray) will further prepare the student with autism for the lunch time routine change. Some kindergarten teachers will read the story for the whole class. All children, not just those with autism, like structure and routine. Why only prepare the children with autism for a scheduling change when the whole class would benefit from the preparation discussion? I have included a social story used for Taylor, a kindergartener, as an example of how to use this strategy.
 5. If the classroom teacher has not discussed tolerance and the difference in all children, then this discussion should take place before the start of Lunch Bunch. I have provided a list of materials and activities to assist in teaching tolerance.

Special people, Special Ways by Arlene Maguire- Beyond our limitations is a world of unique gifts for each of us to share.

I'm Like You, You're like me: A Child's Book About Understanding and Celebrating Each Other! By C. Gainer- A book for young children on human variation. The book gradually moves to more advanced/abstract topics, like thoughts and feelings.

Marble Jar Program- *Inclusive Programming for Elementary Students with Autism* by Shelia Wagner

An issue for parents and teachers is whether or not to "reveal" the child with autism's diagnosis. Parents worry that their child will be labeled or bullied if classmates "find out" that he has autism. The truth of the matter is that the child's classmates know that something is different about him. Children will fill-in the gaps with their own ideas-*he's bad, he's weird, he never listens, or he's mean*. Children tend to be very tolerant of the difference of classmate with autism when educated on some basic information on the diagnosis. They are also more motivated to be a part of the social programs with the child. Providing the class with some knowledge of autism also prevents uncomfortable questions such as, "Why does Billy always get to be in Lunch Bunch?" and "Why does he do that?" A teacher should of course never initiate a discussion of this type without

parents' permission. Discussing autism with the classroom does not have to be an uncomfortable topic. With younger students the topic could be discussed when the child is "Kid of the Week" which is an appropriate time to discuss a child's uniqueness. In our Inclusion Project we never mention the word *autism* to the younger elementary school children and there isn't an issue about the child's difference of behavior. Using the classroom philosophy of *we are all different and some kids need a little more help to learn how to be friends* seems to satisfy the curiosity of younger students. Discretion must be used with older students. Here are some books that help explain autism to a child's peers.

For younger kids (Kindergarten -3rd grd.)

Captain Tommy by Abby Ward Messer- Picture book story about a young boy at camp who meets a peer with autism.

Asperger's, Huh by Rosina Schnurr- One boy's perspective on having Asperger's Syndrome.

Taking Autism to School by A. Edwards- Angel introduces her friend Sam to the Reader. Sam has autism. Discusses Sam's behavior and special supports such as his picture schedule

For older kids (4th-middle school)

Autism Through a Sister's Eyes by eve Band and Emily Hecht- A girls view of her brother's autism.

6. Reinforcers! We always give out "prizes" for the students who participated in the Lunch Bunch session. The "prizes" are to reinforce participation in the Lunch Bunch and to motivate the other classmates into attending Lunch Bunch. Nothing motivates like stickers and candy! I find that stickers work well for most primary school situations. A child coming into the classroom with candy causes a commotion among the classmates without candy. If this causes a problem with the teacher, she is less likely to be supportive of the Lunch Bunch Program. When shopping for stickers, chose the "good stuff"-Barbie, sharks, or whatever is popular with the age group so that other classmates notice the stickers and ask, "Where did you get that sticker?" Older students want candy. I have found that candy is age-appropriately reinforcing even to middle-schoolers.
7. Let the classroom teacher know the routine of Lunch Bunch before the first day. She may be asking herself, "Do I need to have Lunch Bunch kids at the front of the line to get lunches quickly? She may be confused about sending the students to the Lunch Bunch room, having them wait in the cafeteria, or having them sit with the class until the facilitator comes to pick them up. What if the Lunch Bunch students are late coming back to the cafeteria? Does she take the rest of the class back to the classroom? Will the Lunch Bunch students return late and disturb story time? Discuss the routine and any problems associated with the

routine so that the classroom teacher's confusion and/or questions are eliminated. The smoother the transitions, the more successful the program will be. If Lunch Bunch causes problems for the classroom routine, the classroom teacher will less likely be an advocate for the program.

The first day...

Some bright ideas for you

- **Have the first participants make up the rules.** I find that students pick out very appropriate ones such as, *be polite, listen while a friend is talking, participate in games.*
- **Have a visual schedule of the Lunch Bunch Routine.** For example, 1) eat lunch and talk to friends, 2) clean up, 3) play a game, 4) get a prize, 5) return trays to the lunch room.
- **Start a conversation jar.** Put in conversational topics or questions in a container. Put in topics children typically talk about-cartoons, video games, pets, etc. Questions can be "getting to know you" type questions- favorite color, T.V. show, pets at home. The conversation jar can be the "ice-breaker" for the group. After the students have gotten familiar with each other, the conversation jar can be used to prompt particular pragmatic skills.
- **Use a turn- taking card (included).** A turn-taking card can be as simple as an index card with "My Turn" written on it. For students with turn-taking difficulty, the card provides a visual reminder.

Games for Lunch Bunch

Here are some board games ideas for Lunch Bunch groups. All games listed can be played in relatively short periods of time and are favorites of all the Lunch Bunch friends in the Inclusion Program. Prices are listed in order for you to do budgeting plans if initiating a program. Almost all games can be found at Toys 'R' Us.

The little Kids (elementary school)

Oreo Game (\$5.99 Fisher-Price) - The game has half matches of Oreo Cookies. The object of the game is to match the halves to make a whole cookie. The way we play is to divide the halves among the players and have them take turns reaching in the “cookie jar” and checking to see if they have a match to make a cookie. (Kindergarten)

Hi Ho! Cheery-O (\$9.99) - This classic is a great Lunch Bunch game. Kids have to partake in good sportsmanship when putting cherries back on the tree when they spin a dog or bird. (Kindergarten)

Go Fish! (\$6.99 Fisher-Price)- Kids love this game! A magnetic fishing pole picks up the fish. Flip the fish over to reveal the color. Collect all four of your color of fish. This is a great game to promote compliments-“good catch!” Also players have to pass around the fishing pole. (Kindergarten-2nd)

Barnum’s Animal Cracker Game (\$9.99 Fisher-Price) - Plastic “crackers” are in a bag. Players reach inside the bag to choose a cracker to hopefully match the animal cracker on their card. (Kindergarten-1st)

Pretty, Pretty, Princess (\$9.99 Milton Bradley - Players land on game board spaces to pick up “real” necklaces, rings, and tiaras. Great to promote conversations-“you look pretty in your crown”. (Kindergarten-2nd)

Ice Cream Scoops of Fun (\$6.99 Fisher Price) – A more complicated matching game. You have to match the ice cream and the toppings. Some pretend play actions- scooping the ice cream and placing scoops on the plates. The scooper can be passed around for visual turns taking cues. (2nd and 3rd grade)

Sequence for Kids (\$9.99 www.jaxgames.com) – Game uses a game board, chips, and cards. Play a card from your hand and place a chip on the corresponding animal on the game board. Four chips in a row wins! (1st-4th grade)

Charades for Kids (\$9.99 Preeman) – Has a game board in order to keep score. Players draw a card and act out certain words (animals, actions). This can be played on different levels, even within the same game. (1st-4th grade)

Tippin’ Toadstool (may be out of print? Rose Art) – This is a favorite of the Richmond County Lunch Bunch. Players work together to keep the toad from falling off the toadstool.

Other Little Kid Activities

Play-Doh has plastic utensils, cookie cutters, and plates. Play-Doh is a high interest activity that involves different levels of pretend play and skills. Children can make cookies for each other, make lunch, and/or create pretend restaurant menu and play.

Domino Rally (\$9.99 Pavilion) - Set'-um up together and watch the Domino effect at work. This set has an easy set up with Dominos on standing rocks, but a box of mis-matched can do the trick.

Building Materials can be perfect for a targeted child with low game playing- rule following skills. Lunch Bunch group can build together with blocks, Tinkertoys, etc. to create a zoo for plastic animals or roads for matchbox cars.

The Big Kids

Uno Stacker (\$7.99) – Plays like Jenga. Player pills a block and directs the ball by color, number, or command. (3rd and up)

Ker Plunk! (\$9.99) – My favorite game. The marbles are on top of horizontal sticks. Players pull sticks strategically so to not drop the marbles. The winner is the one with the least marbles. This is fun to play in teams so that partners discuss which stick to choose. (3rd - and up)

Cards

My tried and true recipe for social interaction is a deck of cards. The following is a list of my reasons.

- 1) Cards are available in almost every home. So by learning card games we are giving kids an appropriate leisure skill to do in their spare time.
- 2) One deck of cards provides numerous activities-games, magic, and even building materials.
- 3) Kids think cards are cool because adults play cards.
- 4) Cards are portable so they and be taken anywhere (I would take them on a field trips) to provide structure to free time.
- 5) Most card games can have many players.
- 6) The same card game can be fun to elementary children and adults
- 7) Card games have some preset social rules. In my class we played “Vegas Style” which meant that the deck is shuffled 7 times (a legal Vegas shuffle), the dealer rotates, and the cards are passed to the left of the dealer. Vegas style prevented numerous behavior problems.
- 8) Many card games are short.
- 9) Cards are age-appropriate for all ages.

My favorite game to play with all ages is Crazy 8's. It is a great game to start with because it is similar to UNO which lots of kids are familiar with. Here's a website that has a listing of hundreds of games including Crazy 8's. www.pagat.com

My next favorite is Dominoes for similar reasons as for cards. Kids are fascinated by the fact that there is actually a game other than setting them up to knock them down! There are actually 16 different games to play with Dominoes!

