

Thousands of students work to make middle school lunchrooms friendlier

By St. Louis Post-Dispatch, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.24.15

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"I am uncomfortable. I am not used to this," said Kyle Johnson, 14, who cringes as he realizes his blue card does not match the purple color of his usual lunch table friends at Rogers Middle School in Affton, Missouri. The school participated in No One Eats Alone Day by encouraging students to talk to kids outside of their immediate social circle by switching up lunch seating. Photo: Laurie Skrivan/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS

For many kids, middle schools is no picnic. There's awkwardness, cliques and bullying. There are the challenges of puberty and low-self esteem -- or maybe too much self-esteem.

It can all collide in the cafeteria, leaving some kids feeling invisible and like they don't fit in.

A national campaign called "No One Eats Alone Day" is taking aim at social isolation among middle schoolers.

Beyond Differences

Schools are picking up on the student-led program, and more than 300,000 students across the country have signed up to participate. In just a year, participation grew from 35 schools in 2014 to more than 700.

The program was created by Beyond Differences, a national nonprofit group. Its mission is to change the culture in middle schools to make kids feel more accepted and valued.

Social isolation and bullying are now considered huge problems in schools. The program tries to reverse this trend by giving students simple and fun ways to include others during lunchtime — making sure no one eats alone, said Laura Talmus. She is the founder of Beyond Differences.

Middle school was a rough couple of years for Talmus' daughter, Lili Smith, who was born with a cranial facial syndrome. Children with the condition have facial or skull bones that do not grow normally.

"She Felt Invisible"

Talmus said her daughter would finish her lunch at school and call from the restroom crying.

"She would call me almost daily, 'Mom, I have nobody to eat with, and the girls don't want me to sit with them,'" Talmus said. "Lili was never teased or bullied, but was almost suffering as much because she felt invisible."

Lili died at the age of 15 from medical complications of her condition. Afterward, a group of teens from the community banded together to bring change to their local schools.

It's not an easy task.

At Rogers Middle School in Affton, Missouri, resistance to No One Eats Alone Day began after students learned of it through the morning announcements. The student organizers heard that a lot of students were worried that they wouldn't get to sit next to their friends.

Uncomfortable Situation

On Friday, the student members of the school's Mistreatment Leadership Team, an anti-bullying group, placed conversation starters on the round tables in their cafeteria. There were questions like, "Who is your favorite celeb?" and "Who is your role model?"

The students waited nervously with pieces of paper to hand out to classmates, color-coded to randomly assign them to tables.

When the lunch bell rang, there was loud disappointment among those who were separated. Others ran and hugged their friends when they realized they would be at the same table.

Some tried to make the best of what they said was an uncomfortable situation.

“I would much rather sit alone than with people I don’t know, to be honest,” said Cori Caby, a seventh-grader who was at a table with some students she usually sits with and some she doesn’t.

Some Successes Too

Some quietly switched cards so they could sit with their friends. Some got on their cellphones, an easy way to get out of talking to people you don’t know.

No one thought kids were going to become best friends after just one lunch.

The day was more about being aware of other people’s feelings, and encouraging students to reach out and start a conversation with someone they normally don’t talk to, said Reece Black. He is an eighth-grader and one of the organizers. Reece called out at least one table of kids sitting with their usual group.

But he saw successes, too.

Sixth-graders Jenna Walden and Avarry Wilkerson ended up at a table by themselves. When they noticed that Alexander Scherer, a new student at school, was alone, they moved over to sit with him. As he ate his lunch, he and the girls talked about Six Flags.

“By the way, I’m Avarry,” she said to Alexander, just as lunch was wrapping up.

Reece and the other student leaders say they saw other examples of kids reaching out.

“So that was pretty cool,” Reece said.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Beyond Differences" that BEST explains the goal of the "No One Eats Alone Day" campaign.

- 2 Select the sentence from the article that BEST shows that some students don't want to participate in the program.
 - (A) The students waited nervously with pieces of paper to hand out to classmates, color-coded to randomly assign them to tables.
 - (B) When the lunch bell rang, there was loud disappointment among those who were separated.
 - (C) Some quietly switched cards so they could sit with their friends.
 - (D) Sixth-graders Jenna Walden and Avarry Wilkerson ended up at a table by themselves.

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Beyond Differences."

Social isolation and bullying are now considered huge problems in schools.

From which of the following sentences can you understand the meaning of the word "isolation"?

- (A) "She would call me almost daily, 'Mom, I have nobody to eat with, and the girls don't want me to sit with them,'" Talmus said.
- (B) At Rogers Middle School in Affton, Missouri, resistance to No One Eats Alone Day began after students learned of it through the morning announcements.
- (C) When the lunch bell rang, there was loud disappointment among those who were separated.
- (D) "I would much rather sit alone than with people I don't know, to be honest," said Cori Caby, a seventh-grader who was at a table with some students she usually sits with and some she doesn't.

- 4 Which of the following sentences from the article contains a phrase that has the SAME meaning as "communicating"?
- (A) A national campaign called "No One Eats Alone Day" is taking aim at social isolation among middle schoolers.
 - (B) "She would call me almost daily, 'Mom, I have nobody to eat with, and the girls don't want me to sit with them,'" Talmus said.
 - (C) Its mission is to change the culture in middle schools to make kids feel more accepted and valued.
 - (D) Reece and the other student leaders say they saw other examples of kids reaching out.