

Middle school students work to make everyone feel welcome at lunch time

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

Word Count **616**



"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 school is not easy. Kids can be best friends one day and not speak the next. There is bullying. Some kids may have low-self esteem, while others may think too highly of themselves.

All the drama comes together in the cafeteria. During lunchtime, some kids feel like they don't have any friends and do not fit in.

A new project is helping middle schoolers across the country feel included. It is called "No One Eats Alone Day." It makes sure that on one day all the kids have someone to eat with.

More Than 700 Schools Involved

Schools are picking up on the program. More than 300,000 students across the country are taking part in it. In just a year, the program has grown from 35 schools in 2014 to more than 700.

The program was started by Beyond Differences, a national nonprofit group. Its mission is to help all kids feel valued and accepted.

Bullying and excluding others have become huge problems in schools. The program hopes to stop this by giving students simple and fun ways to include others during lunchtime. It makes sure no one eats alone, said Laura Talmus. She started Beyond Differences.

Talmus' daughter, Lili Smith, had a rough time in middle school. She was born with a medical condition. The bones of her face or skull did not grow normally.

Crying In The Restroom

Nearly every day, Lili would call her mother from the restroom, crying.

Lili would say, "Mom, I have nobody to eat with, and the girls don't want me to sit with them," Talmus said. Her daughter was never teased or bullied. However, she suffered almost as much "because she felt invisible."

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

It is not easy.

At Rogers Middle School in Missouri, a lot of kids did not like No One Eats Alone Day. They worried they would not sit next to their friends.

Reaching Out Is Not Easy

At the school, there is an anti-bullying group called the Mistreatment Leadership Team. On Friday, they placed questions on the cafeteria tables. They asked "Who is your favorite celebrity?" and "Who is your role model?" Students could use them if they did not know what to say to each other.

Some students said they felt uncomfortable eating with kids they did not know. They tried to make the best of it, though.

"I would much rather sit alone than with people I don't know, to be honest," said Cori Caby. She is a seventh-grader. She sat with some students she knew and some she did not.

Some switched cards so they could sit with their friends. Some got on their cellphones. They were trying to get out of talking to strangers.

Let's Talk About Six Flags

No one thought the kids were going to become best friends after just one lunch. The idea was to get kids to be more aware of other people's feelings, said Reece Black. He is an eighth-grader and helped organize the event. He and other organizers wanted to encourage students to start a conversation with someone new.

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

“By the way, I’m Avarry,” she said to Alexander.

Reece and the other student leaders said other kids tried to reach out also.

“So that was pretty cool,” Reece said.

Quiz

- 1 According to the article, which of the following sentences is FALSE?
- (A) The aim of the "No One Eats Alone Day" program is to stop bullying in schools.
 - (B) Some students don't want to talk to strangers and become friends with them.
 - (C) Making students to start a conversation with someone new is not an easy task.
 - (D) While in middle school, many kids suffer from low-self esteem.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Reaching Out Is Not Easy" that shows that some kids are not interested in the new program.

- 3 What is the meaning of the phrase "picking up" as it is used in the sentence below?

Schools are picking up on the program.

- (A) to select from a group
 - (B) to follow something
 - (C) to lift something up
 - (D) to collect or gather
- 4 Which of the following can replace the word "rough" in the following sentence?

Talmus' daughter, Lili Smith, had a rough time in middle school.

- (A) annoying
- (B) difficult
- (C) violent
- (D) boring

Answer Key

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Paragraph 15:

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