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**Picture: a photograph from the book of a "Golden Table of the Week" – a special privilege awarded to children who have kept the dining hall rules really well**

## Why dining halls are the key to creating calmer and happier children – and headteachers

### Report by Jenny Mosley

While I see so much improvement in the many schools that I visit each term for training and consultancy, dining halls are really getting left behind. Dining halls are too busy, due to, in some cases, the balance having been tipped with the advent of universal infant free school meals, the push for improvement of meals and the general trend for an increasing number of children on roll.

Many hardworking midday supervisors are very rarely trained, have few meetings and not offered much in the way of real support.

Whenever I am in a school, I always try to eat with children in the dining halls – they speak volumes – and Ofsted is now inspecting them too!

Sometimes I can see that the dining hall systems haven't been looked at for a very long time. For example when I see waste scraping bins put near the servery – this puts children off eating before

they even get their lunch!

When I hear adults blowing whistles or banging tambourines and shouting in an attempt to gain quiet so that they can speak, I see frustrated, hungry, noisy children queueing for far too long and wasting eating, socialising and playing time. Often in a dining hall there are no behaviour guidelines, ie posters of the school's Golden Rules accompanied by specific dining hall expectations, eg 'thank you for keeping your table clean', 'thank you for speaking quietly'... 'thank you for trying new food'...

Busy headteachers are often spending their valuable lunch hour directing dining hall queues and trying to keep everyone calm.

We need to engage with all our Dining Hall systems, not just for ours and the children's wellbeing but because it will release academic excellence in the afternoon.

In 2010 The School Food Trust reported that "Primary school pupils were more alert and over three times more likely to be 'on-task' working with the teacher in the classroom after lunch, following an intervention to improve the dining environment and the nutritional quality of the food served."

So can we please not forget that dining hall provides a unique opportunity for children to

learn essential life skills like enjoying socialising, selecting healthy meal options, trying new foods, eating with good table manners, clearing plates, honing cutlery skills and speaking calmly to name but a few.

We all know that many families are very busy or just unable to sit together around a table to share meals and discuss their day and the dining hall is just the place to help remedy that.

In my new book 'How To Create Calm Dining Halls' I have used my years of visiting schools to bring together a rich weave of practical ideas to support children, catering managers, midday supervisors and headteachers.

Some ideas will make a difference immediately, others will take a longer but I am convinced that any improvements will pay off. In the book I cover 'how to create a whole school approach', positive behaviour, reducing queuing problems, how to get quiet, how to encourage healthy eating and much more.

Questionnaires and photocopiables provide within the book act as prompts for engaging and involving everyone. I have also included inspirational case studies from schools already engaged in very exciting changes.

I think one headteacher, John Talbot from Smiths Wood Primary Academy phrases it well. He said "Lunchtimes are about an hour of the school day. The lessons may have ended but the learning needs to continue..."