



Supporting the Whole School Day: Lunch, Recess, and Specials

The school day includes more than classroom learning. Lunch, recess, and specials/electives (such as art, music, physical education (PE), technology, or language) are important for building independence, friendships, and skill building in a variety of areas. While these parts of the day are engaging and fun, these settings are often busier and less structured, and some students may need additional support to participate fully and successfully.

Impact on student participation

Some students may experience challenges during lunch, recess, or specials that affect their ability to participate independently or comfortably. These challenges may include difficulty with:

- Opening containers and managing lunch items efficiently
- Waiting in line, finding a seat, or navigating crowded spaces
- Coping with noise, smells, or high levels of activity
- Joining games, taking turns, or handling conflict during recess
- Transitioning to and from specials and managing materials (art supplies, instruments, or PE equipment)
- Following multi-step directions in group settings
- Acquiring skills like how to use measuring instruments, power tools, or software programs

Occupational therapy focuses on understanding how these challenges affect participation and identifying supports that allow students to engage alongside their peers.

How school-based occupational therapy can help

School-based occupational therapy (OT) supports students' ability to participate in school routines and activities across the entire school day, including learning, play, social participation, and self-care.

OT practitioners may:

- Observe students across settings (cafeteria, playground, specials) to understand what supports or interferes with participation
- Use task analysis to identify strengths and barriers related to sensory processing, motor skills, social-emotional skills, and attention or organization

- Recommend routines, tools, and environmental supports that fit naturally within each school setting
- Collaborate with teachers, staff, and families to support inclusion and successful participation
- Build student independence by teaching practical skills and strategies (for example, lunch routines or scripts for joining games)

Occupational therapy services may be provided at different levels, including school-wide strategies that support all students, small-group supports for students who may be at risk, and individualized interventions for students who need more intensive support.

Through collaboration and practical strategies, occupational therapy helps students access, participate in, and benefit from the full school day.

Contact

If you're interested in learning if OT services might be helpful for your child at AIM, please contact supportservices@aimpa.org.

Sources

1. American Occupational Therapy Association. *Occupational Therapy's Role in Mental Health Promotion, Prevention, and Intervention With Children and Youth: Recess Promotion*. American Occupational Therapy Association; 2012. Accessed February 5, 2026.
2. American Occupational Therapy Association. *Occupational Therapy's Role in Mental Health Promotion, Prevention, and Intervention With Children and Youth: The Cafeteria—Creating a Positive Mealtime Experience*. American Occupational Therapy Association; 2013. Accessed February 5, 2026.