Creating a positive lunchtime environment

Our surroundings play a huge role in how we react to the food in front of us. Just think about how restaurants use light, sound and design to create an environment where we can best enjoy our meals. The same is true with children and young people too. How much food they eat, which foods they want to eat and how comfortable they feel eating are all impacted heavily by their immediate surroundings. Here are some of our top tips for creating a dining environment where children and young people can best enjoy their school lunch.

How can we create a positive lunchtime environment?

Make your dining space calm and relaxed	Children and young people are more likely to enjoy their food when feeling relaxed, so do your best to make sure the lunchtime environment at your school is a calm one. Do this by encouraging children and young people to use "inside" voices. Put up signs and posters promoting relaxation and use calm background music to enhance this.
Keep the environment clean and appealing	Children's senses are more heightened than ours, so they can react negatively when the environment smells unpleasant, looks unattractive, or feels unclean. It's important to ensure the floor, tables and plates look and feel clean. Try using posters, colours and nice smells to create nice dining surroundings!
Positive role modeling	Where possible, encourage staff to sit and eat with the students as this models good eating behaviour. In general, behaviour is also better when more adults are present.
Keep queuing times short	Staggering lunchbreaks, introducing more service points, or serving food family-style at the table are ways to cut down queues at lunchtime.
Allow students to sit together	Create an inclusive environment and don't divide children and young people based on what they are eating. This will mean that those eating packed lunches aren't segregated.
Encourage students not to rush off	Make sure that any systems you have in place for when children and young people are allowed to leave the dining hall are not based around finishing food quickly. Ensuring children and young people wait and don't leave immediately when their food is finished should lead to a less manic and rushed lunchtime.

Keep the environment pressure free!

Whilst it's good to encourage students to try different foods, try not to force them to eat foods they don't want - and don't prevent them leaving the dining hall until they've finished all their food. This type of stress and pressure around mealtimes can cause them to have a difficult relationship with food when they grow up.