

# ***Cooking for Independence: Middle School Students Gain Skills While Cooking***

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## ***Abstract***

Middle school students with intellectual disabilities often have difficulties achieving independence with instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs); therefore, these skills must be taught in school. IADLs are a complex component of skills that require a higher level of cognitive reasoning such as community mobility, shopping, meal preparation and clean-up. A cooking club was utilized to help intellectually middle school students with disabilities gain independence in IADLs. Those students were enrolled in a multi-aged, self-contained, special education class when they participated in the cooking club; they showed an increased independence with meal preparation, shopping, community mobility, purchasing transaction skills, menu selection and overall self confidence.

For the past decade, there has been an increased focus on integrating people with intellectual disabilities into the local community (Drysdale, Casey & Armstrong, 2007). This has created a need to equip those individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in this community. Some of the skills needed for success include: community mobility, shopping, and meal preparation which require more abstract cognitive skills. These complex skills have been defined as instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) by the American Occupational Therapy Association (2008). Because parents of children with intellectual disabilities tend to be over protective, independence in IADLs must be taught in school (Drysdale, Casey & Armstrong, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to describe how a cooking club was utilized to help middle school with intellectual disabilities students gain independence in IADLs.

## ***Goals of the Cooking Club***

The primary goal of the cooking club is to increase the students' ability to independently:

- Plan a balanced meal
- Prepare a shopping list
- Select items in a store from a shopping list
- Complete a purchasing transaction
- Prepare a meal following a recipe
- Set a table
- Serve a meal family-style
- Clean-up after a meal

Students who participate in the cooking club will:

- Improve social skills
- Increase friendships
- Compile a personal picture cookbook (cookbook will contain all of the picture recipes that the student has mastered)

### ***Forming the Cooking Club***

The middle school students range in age from 12-16 years old, and have a variety of diagnoses such as, Down's syndrome, Autism, Mental Retardation, Traumatic Brain Injury, and language impairment. All of the students are in a self-contained, multi-aged, special education class where they receive the majority of their instruction. Nevertheless, students who require support beyond that which is provided by the classroom teacher are targeted for sessions with an occupational therapist and/or speech therapist. When participating in the Cooking Club a slight departure from these regular procedures is evident. For example, students work in small rotating groups of three persons to host the Club meal. These small groups are formed, dissolved and reformed until every student has had an opportunity to serve as host.

### ***Roles of the Groups Facilitators***

To ensure success, in completing all Club activities, the group facilitators should include a special education teacher, occupational therapist, and speech therapist. Although the roles of these facilitators are interchangeable they are typically, as follows: the special education teacher is responsible for selecting the student team that will host the group, assisting the team with menu selection and preparing the picture recipe; the occupational therapist is responsible for assisting the students with creating invitations for meal guests, preparing the shopping list, selecting items in the grocery store, completing purchasing transactions and preparing the meal; while the speech therapist is responsible for assisting the students with communication needs in the community and for facilitating conversation during group interactions.

### ***The Cooking Club in Action***

Once a month a team of students is chosen by the special education teacher to host the cooking club, the team consists of 3 students who work co-operatively to complete the steps involved in planning and preparing a the meal. Each team member gets the opportunity to invite a student from another self-contained special education class to participate in the club meal. If there is a disagreement regarding an issue, then a vote is taken among the team members. This process helps to improve social skills and foster friendships. In addition to inviting the guests, it is also the responsibility of the team to select the menu, make the shopping list, shop for the items on the prepared list as well as prepare and serve the meal to the invited guests. The occupational therapist helps team members create invitations for the cooking club guests. The students have the choice of using pre-made invitations or creating invitations from scratch. The occupational therapist works with the team on communication management which includes handwriting,

keyboarding, visual and fine motor skills and at times assistive technology devices to create the invitations. After the students have selected a meal from *Cooking Made Easy* (a cookbook that contains step by step pictures of breakfast, lunch and dinner recipes which have been created by the group facilitators), the occupational therapist assists the students with making a shopping list. Depending on the students' functional level this step can be achieved in the following ways: students make a written shopping list from the recipes; students use pictures from a store circular to create a picture shopping list; or students can use picture cards.

Next, the students are required to locate and purchase the items on the prepared shopping list during a community-based instruction outing. Community-based instruction is a systematic training of individuals in functional skills within the natural community setting where such skills are used to enhance the transition to independent living in the local community (Education.com, 2006). In other words, community-based instruction occurs outside the educational environment within the natural community, such as grocery stores, malls or department stores. In the middle school, students participate in community-based instruction two times per week. The role of the occupational therapist in this setting is to assist students with community mobility which includes crossing the street safely, navigating in the store, locating items in the store, using a cart or basket, and completing the purchasing transaction. It is also the responsibility of the students to store purchased items in the appropriate place in the kitchen; this activity is a component of home management (AOTA, 2008).

Finally, the day of the Cooking Club meeting the team members prepare and serve the meal. The meal is served family-style with facilitators available to assist with communication needs, facilitation of conversation and proper table manners. Once the meal has been completed, the team is responsible for clean-up and restoring order to the kitchen and dining area.

### ***Effectiveness of the Cooking Club***

Parents of the cooking club participants have reported an overall increase in independence in IADLs and self-confidence in their children. They have reported that their children have begun to participate in activities at home such as: independently preparing meals for themselves, participating in shopping tasks and home management activities such as putting groceries in their appropriate place, and clean-up tasks like washing the dishes, sweeping and cleaning the table. Generally, the group facilitators have observed that students who participated in the cooking club show an improvement in social skills, self-reliance, self-esteem, co-operative learning and independence in IADLs in the areas of community mobility, communication management, shopping, meal preparation and clean-up. Thus, it is evident that utilizing a cooking club is an effective way to address IADLs in the middle school setting.

### ***References***

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