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No such thing as a stress-free lunch...

To be a nurse, friend and waitress is all in a day's work for the midday supervisor, as **Shirley Rose** reveals ...

Amelia, aged five, was asked how she was finding her new school in east London. "I like the teachers," she replied. "But I don't like the servants." She meant the women who run the playground at lunchtimes, called variously midday supervisors, lunchtime supervisors, midday supervisory assistants or play workers - but, almost universally, known to children as dinner ladies.

The playground is a theatre for the unexpected, where, in the film-reel imaginations of the children, helicopters land, and wounded soldiers escape.

Children get cut on climbing apparatus and, on occasions, break bones or worse. One lunchtime supervisor said: "You need eyes in the back of your head. We are expected to encourage, and join in with constructive play, at the same time as taking skipping ropes off children's necks, and removing children from the roof."

They also break up fights, (in some local authorities without touching the children), supervise lining up for dinner and its eating, deal with grazed limbs and, of course, listen to children's concerns about the injustices inflicted by fellow pupils.

Lunchtime supervisors need to be aware of bullying and to be sensitive to cultural and social issues. All for approximately £5.50 an hour!

Look at it from another perspective; that of the headteacher. She may come out of a lunchtime staff meeting to find six children standing outside her office, sent there by the playground assistants for misbehaving. She probably believes that, whatever happened in the playground, disciplining would not now be required if a teacher had been outside dealing with the children. Somewhere between the two lies the truth, which probably varies greatly from school to school.

For the past 18 months I have been training these women - they are almost exclusively female - in London primary schools. I focus on listening skills, encouraging acceptable behaviour, challenging difficult behaviour, and other child-related topics.

I became interested when my excellent childminder Linda told me about her "other job" as a senior lunchtime supervisor at our local school in north London. She had had no training. As a social worker with more than 15 years' experience, I have an evangelical commitment to the importance of listening to children. I worked until last year as a counselling supervisor at ChildLine, advising young people who ring the helpline and supervising and training volunteers. Such work has reinforced my view that people working with children need training. With the help of Linda and a supportive local head, I piloted a five-hour course.

When I started, I had a rather negative impression of lunchtime supervisors based on anecdotes from friends and moans from children. I feared that they were not attuned to children's needs and, I must admit, I set out to teach them how "to do it better". My thinking and practice have moved on considerably, as the students have educated me in the complexity of their job.

During the training, the sharing of experiences and skills raises participants' self-esteem and helps to improve their practice. I now know that lunchtime supervisors have to deal with a range of stressful and unpleasant tasks, as well as some enjoyable ones.

They are familiar with many bodily products, particularly blood. They have to deal with verbally and physically aggressive children (and adults).

It is not unusual to be told "You are just the dinner lady" - strictly speaking, they cook and serve the food - or even to be bitten by an angry child. Remember the stabbing of a supervisor in a Tottenham playground?

The boundaries of the role of these lowly-paid women and issues of confidentiality are complex. They often live locally and have strong community links. What do you do when you meet a parent in the local supermarket, who wants to discuss their son's food intake or, even worse, the bad behaviour of another child? Sympathetic supervisors will hear lots about children's unhappiness, including serious disclosures of abuse.

They are occasionally required to make police statements or give court evidence. They must always report serious concerns to a senior member of staff.

The weather takes on a whole new meaning. I am told how long an hour-and-a-half can feel on a cold, November day. Rainy days are a logistical nightmare, worse still when there are heavy scattered showers - do you keep the children in or let them out?

Windy days are the most unnerving as, for some inexplicable reason, children run wild. We have lively discussions about the women's relationships with other school staff members. I regularly hear bitter complaints of feeling excluded, undervalued and unsupported. Their most common concerns are: lack of communication, limited information about the children, feeling looked down upon by teachers who are "just too busy", and of limited back-up when "the going gets tough".

As part of the training programme, I have introduced a slot where the headteacher joins us. These sessions are nearly always constructive and have helped participants to understand the very real pressures facing different staff groups. We negotiate action plans and people leave feeling less burdened. I am now convinced that unless lunchtime supervisors are valued and given proper status in schools they will find it difficult to support and value our children. It alarms me that many authorities and schools fail to train this valuable group of people.

RECIPES FOR HAPPY LUNCHTIMES:

1. Regular structured meetings between lunchtime supervisors and the head.
 2. Formulate a whole-school behaviour policy. Sanctions and rewards should be consistent, the same at lunchtime as during the rest of the school day.
 3. Raise self-esteem and status of your lunchtime supervisors within the school. See Jenny Mosley's book 'Turn Your School Round.' Published by LDA (Cambridge) £19.95.
 4. Provide career reviews and regular training.
 5. Remember, when working well, lunchtime supervisors help to keep our children physically safe and to develop crucial social skills in relation to food, play and friendship groups. What could be more important?
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