

Food play for the under-fives

As parents, we all want to encourage our children to eat and enjoy a healthy, varied diet and to have a positive relationship with food. As they grow, we also want them to understand the importance of good nutrition.

We have an important role to play in shaping our children's food preferences and helping them develop healthy behaviour at mealtimes and with regard to food choices. One way of doing this is by letting our children learn through food play.

Food play exposes children to foods they may not be familiar with and allows them to explore these in a fun way. By playing and experimenting they can learn about healthy foods and increase their understanding of making choices that are better for them.

There are several ways in which children can learn through food play. Here are some ideas:

Sensory play

Let children play with homemade play dough, bread dough, whole fruits and vegetables, herbs, spices and with cooking equipment, such as whisks, mixing bowls and spoons, to increase their awareness of textures, smells and colours. This will help them become more familiar with and better able to identify different foods.

Role play

Set up a simple shop, café or kitchen to give your child the opportunity to play imaginatively. Including real foods can enhance the experience and further develop their vocabulary.

Cookery

When preparing food for a specific purpose – such as a snack or lunch

– allow your child to wash, mix and mash foods. This is a good opportunity for you to teach them about nutrition and helps them learn good habits when making food choices. Using a variety of foods is key to helping children develop a range of food preferences.

Food art

Use food to help your child create a piece of art that can be eaten, such as soft-berry butterflies or banana flowers. Food can also be used as a printing or mark-making tool with vegetables such as potatoes, broccoli, corn on the cob and mushrooms to make interesting patterns and shapes.

Stories and songs

Choose songs about food to engage children further and instill in them the ability to make healthy choices. The Internet is a great resource for finding new songs and includes old favourites such as *Five little peas*, *One potato, two potato*, and *Pat-a-cake*.

Themes

Use any opportunity to widen your child's food experience throughout the year during different seasons, festivals and celebrations. Many of these include certain foods and traditions that children find fascinating.

Exposure to a variety of foods through play can be highly valuable for children in developing their nutritional behaviour.



It also helps them develop communication and language skills, physical development and personal skills, and with their social and emotional development.

So have fun with food and watch your child's food choices grow and develop.

About the author:

The Food Teacher, Katharine Tate, has worked as a teacher and education consultant internationally in primary and secondary schools for over 20 years. Qualified as a registered nutritional therapist, Katharine combines her unique education and nutrition expertise to offer schools, organisations and families advice, education programmes, practical workshops, and individual/family consultations.

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