
Playing with Food

Food plays an important role in early childhood settings. Everyone eats, of course, and you probably have “pretend food” in your dramatic play area. Two areas of the classroom where the use of food is more problematic, though, are sensory and art tables. In a nutritionally purposeful early care setting, food is respected as something that nourishes and sustains us, and isn’t used as a play object.

The problem with “food as play”

When children play with food, such as a sensory table filled with beans or making collages out of pasta, it’s no longer edible at the end of the activity. You can’t eat a potato covered in paint, and you wouldn’t want to cook rice after it’s been played with. Many families are food insecure—imagine being hungry and being told you can’t eat something because you have to paint with it, or seeing enough rice to feed your family for weeks going to waste. Young children may also struggle to understand why it’s okay to eat food when it’s on the lunch table but not the art table.



To teach children to honor food as something that nourishes us, avoid using rice or pasta in your sensory table

Key Points

- Food should be respected as food, not used as a toy.
- Food-based activities should always end with the food being edible, and children given the opportunity to taste it.
- Use nonfood items for activities where tasting would not be possible.

Using food to learn

It’s okay to use food in classroom activities when it’s respected as food and all activities lead to tasting a food that’s still edible. You can invite children to investigate, explore, describe, draw, cook with, and eat different types of foods. Using food as a learning tool (but not a toy) this way also provides children with repeated exposures to healthy foods, which are critical in the development of food preferences and healthy eating behaviors.

Instead of playing with food...

- Use nonfood items for your sensory table, math manipulatives, and other classroom activities. You can fill your table with water, sand, leaves, pebbles, pine cones, shredded paper, or pompoms, and use buttons, rocks, or coins for counting. You can make prints with nonedible plant parts like leaves.
 - Use food for sensory exploration activities. Invite children to dissect vegetables, examine fruit with magnifying glasses, describe different foods’ textures, and use all of their senses to explore how foods look, feel, smell, taste, and even sound. At the art table, food can serve as a model for still life drawings.
 - To teach children about food, invite them to cook! When children help prepare foods, they’re more likely to eat them, and they’ll be excited to prepare and taste recipes made with nutritious ingredients like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
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Comparing Bell Peppers

Here's a sensory exploration activity from the Early Sprouts curriculum for you to try in your classroom. Children can discuss how different colored peppers are different from and similar to each other, explore the parts of the peppers, and describe the peppers as they taste them.

Materials needed:

Green, red, and yellow bell peppers (several children can share a pepper)

Child-safe knives

Small cutting boards or paper plates

Small bowls

1 large bowl (for inedible scraps)

1. Children wash hands and sit or stand at the activity table.
2. Children describe similarities and differences of the bell peppers ("How are the peppers the same?" "How are the peppers different?")
3. Children use knives to carefully cut the peppers and describe what they see on the inside. Identify the various parts ("Where is the skin?" "Where are the seeds?")
4. Conduct a taste investigation of each pepper and support the children in describing the pepper's characteristics. Avoid using terms that imply a value, such as "better" or "best." Ask children, "Which pepper is the juiciest?" "Which is the crunchiest?" "Which is the shiniest?"
5. Record the results on a simple chart.
6. Remind children to wash hands again if they want to resume cutting peppers after they've tasted them.
7. Clean up. If you can, compost the parts of the peppers that can't be eaten.



Remember...

- ◆ Honor food as something that nourishes us.
- ◆ Food can be used in the classroom as a learning tool, rather than as a plaything.
- ◆ Invite children to explore, cook with, and taste food.

Early Sprouts, an award-winning "seed to table" gardening and nutrition curriculum, fosters enthusiasm for healthy foods in young children.

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