

Developmentally Appropriate Food and Nutrition Skills for Young Children

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Introduction

- How do children become responsible?
- How do children learn to manage and be independent?
- How do they gain self-confidence, discover new ideas, and learn to figure things out?
- How are food habits formed?

By interacting with their surroundings, children are able to examine, question, and understand things around them and begin to build basic concepts, learning through exploration, discovering variety in foods, and developing sound nutrition habits. Parents, teachers, and child care providers can accumulate new ideas for planning exciting learning adventures for young children through food experiences. Understanding the developmental levels of young children is critical in order to plan effective learning activities.

Developmentally Appropriate Learning

Human development research says that a cycle of growth and change can be predicted in children during the first 9 years of life. Learning about development typical of children within this age span provides a structure for teachers to plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences and for parents to understand their child in an

effort to develop practical expectations for children's accomplishments and actions.

Age appropriateness refers to the predictable sequences of growth occurring in young children. Individual appropriateness adds the understanding that children are unique with individual patterns for growth and development. Rather than the child being molded to a particular learning environment, the learning setting should be adjusted for the child's interests and abilities.

Food experiences include both science and nutrition learning. There are a variety of thinking, interacting, and rearranging skills to be learned while engaging children in food activities learning:

- concepts of empty, full, pouring, scooping, measuring, straining, and heating are principles applied in science
- protein foods (meat, milk, and eggs) need to be stored at cold temperatures or sickness can result
- signs of good and poor food quality
- nutrients needed for health and growth
- nutrients associated with health risks

In this series, the developmental skills in the preschool years are divided into three general levels:

- 2-3 years = naming and identifying
- 3-5 years = sorting and classifying
- 4-6 years = ordering, sequencing and comprehension

Developmental Milestones

The first year

From birth to about age 2, infants are concerned with making personal connections with others who are important in their worlds. They are trying to make sense out of the things around them and to develop a sense of trust. Attachment to adult caregivers, however, makes it possible for infants to build a sense of loving and caring necessary to develop future relationships. During this time, children do not believe that things exist unless they can see them. Only as children experiment through touching, dropping, pushing, and pulling do they begin to build what they know.

The preschool years

These years are the most significant in a person's life for the development of thinking skills. During this time, language develops very fast, children begin to understand symbols and socialization, real concepts (love, feelings, hot, dirty, dangerous) become more meaningful.

Toddling, exploring, and pounding are often worrisome to parents but traits which are normal during this stage. Skills are being developed when children touch, feel, look, mix-up, turn over, and throw. Exploration and the need to test independence seem to dominate during this time. Independent actions often create a power struggle in an effort for children to discover new things; however, tests of independence should be expected, planned for, and anticipated with balance in the environment.

Independence is the primary emotional stage during the early preschool years. With the importance of toilet training and language

development, caregivers should be sensitive to developing independence and not shame and doubt. Use of guilt and severe punishments in reaction to acts of normal development can be harmful during this important period.

Learning to be independent paves the way for the child to develop a healthy sense of initiative, drive, or motivation. Children who learn to start their own activities lay the groundwork for positive and productive school experiences. Again, exploration, questioning, and investigation play a major role in development.

In the early preschool years, children are experimenting with language as they learn to name objects, to identify pictures, labels and symbols, and to combine words and ideas while communicating, negotiating, and making decisions with playmates.

As children advance in their thought processes, the preschooler should be able to begin to use simple classification (putting like things together by color, shape). More advanced classification follows (animals include cows, chickens, dogs; and birds include robins, eagles, and blue jays).

Appropriate Limits

A pleasant tone, an appropriate environmental setting, and positive interactions foster a secure learning climate. Using words such as "please" and "thank-you" during mealtime, while giving an example of passing foods, provides a model for what is expected. Use of redirection, cooperation, and choice promotes greater successes than negatives, punishment, and extended waiting times for young children making mistakes or for those who have not learned the concept of self-control.

Parent Involvement

Parents can gain skills which benefit their parenting by being directly involved in their children's learning. Whether at home or as part of a group child care setting, parents can actively be involved with children. They can do this by sharing personal experiences, work, or hobby activities, interacting through reading and talking, and supervising children during special trips.

More extensively, parents can actively be involved in their child's learning by sharing philosophies, and assisting with child care programs in an advisory role. Communication with parents about daily activities through bulletin boards, door posters, schedules, and newsletters enhances parent involvement and teacher-parent communication. This in turn raises the quality of the child's and the family's learning experience.

To assist children with their independence and knowledge growth, adults can ask open-ended questions to encourage children to think, to discover meanings, and to form new interpretations. Young children are very egocentric, seeing the world through their eyes only. Having patience for developmental sequences to unfold is challenging but enlightening. Examples of questions might be:

- What do you think we should do about that?
- Why do you think that happened?
- How could we use this?
- Can we do it a different way?

Diversity

There are many types of families. Single-parent families, dual career families, blended families, and extended families. Most families usually share some mealtime experience and responsibilities to some degree. Meal time, shopping time, and food preparation times are excellent times to model appropriate social behaviors, teach food concepts, and cultivate nutritious food habits. Learning through food experiences is an ideal way to prepare children to respect family and individual diversity. The appreciation of differences can and should be integrated into the total array of learning activities for young children. Showcasing holidays or featuring one country each week is referred to as the "tourist approach" to multicultural education. This approach, although better than no attention to diversity, communicates the feeling of differences as opposed to integrating difference wholly into the learning.

A few examples of ways to integrate diversity into the classroom: Include chopsticks, a wok, wooden bowls and rice bowls in the kitchen area; include a cross representation of dolls in housekeeping and figurines in the block area for play; critically read books for stereotyping or traditional gender roles; provide skin tone paints and alternative colors during seasonal and secular holidays.

Play and Food Experiences

Play in early childhood is primarily dramatic in nature. Pretend play experiences become more social with age. Play stages move from solitary play in the first two years of life to social and pretend play during the latter part of the third year; replaced by games with rules around the age of 7. The following section is intended as a suggestion or cue listing of ideas for incorporating creative play into activities for young children.

Creative and Dramatic Play

These are times for children to put into action the world as they see it, to reinforce concepts and clarify ideas, to explore cultural diversity and ethnic differences through materials, props, music, art and language. During play, children can express feelings and ideas, discover new ways to do things, and pretend. Caring for dolls and driving cars, playing work or house in the sandbox or a play area are familiar experiences. Through dramatic play children sort out ideas about what is happening around them, find satisfaction, and often resolve conflict. These are excellent ways for adults to learn what children are thinking. Interacting by preparing the environment and posing thought provoking questions allows children to learn while expressing their feelings.

Role Playing, Skits, and Puppet Shows

These are all forms of dramatic play. Each provides children the opportunity to play back experiences learned on a field trip or from other special activities. Play areas can be designated a grocery store, work place, hospital, kitchen, restaurant, bakeries, and so forth.

Prop Boxes

Prop Boxes are cardboard or plastic boxes with theme materials for children to play with in dramatic play activities. Real life things in the prop box provide children a chance to experiment and play out interpretations of what children are learning. Ask families for ideas and contributions. Check that items are clean and safe for use in prop boxes. Community businesses often contribute items for prop boxes (restaurants, hospitals, banks, lawn care).

Art

Activities can introduce food related concepts or summarize ideas about field trips. Muffins or salads can be decorated or designed for special events. Children can mold clay or play dough to look like different foods; fingerpaint with fingerpaints or pudding; make collages from seeds, nut shells, pastas, or grains; and draw pictures or make murals to tell about their field trip to the orchard or about special events. Children can make natural dyes from berries, grapes, onion skins, red beets, or purple cabbage to be used with vegetable prints (potato or citrus fruit) or to color eggs.

Storytelling

Children can tell stories in the form of art work and/or written words. Write the child's words for the story to accompany art work. Use various media to allow children self-expression. Many foods lend themselves to collages, fingerpainting, dyes, prints, etc.

Music

Beating on pots and pans, listening to various melodies, witnessing the movement of people or their environment, and integrating culturally diverse rhythms, beats, and styles are all forms of music. Jingles, simple tunes and rhymes about brushing teeth, foods growing, or daily routines are fun for children. They will enjoy creative dance whether copying the movement of those around them or pretending to be the wind blowing through the fields; water drops falling, bouncing and rolling off food; or food bubbling and cooking.

Puzzles

Puzzles help children identify shapes and name new objects. Simple puzzles of wood or thick cardboard for preschoolers provide a manipulative activity older preschoolers find engaging. Use pictures or outlines of food, of farm animals, or of people. Make each object a puzzle part. Three or four puzzle parts may seem simple to the adult, but the child will need time to figure out shapes and how to fit the pieces in place. Although you might write the names of key nutrients on foods (calcium on milk and cheese, iron and protein on meat and dried beans, vitamin A on broccoli, and vitamin C on citrus), the skill of reading and comprehending the use of nutrients by the body is developmentally appropriate for older preschoolers.