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Responsible Food and Nutrition Decisions Preschoolers

Ann A. Hertzler

Extension Specialist, Nutrition and Foods, Virginia Tech

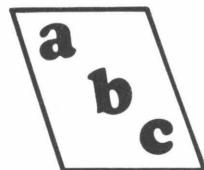
How do children become responsible? How do children learn to manage and be independent? How do they gain self-confidence, discover new ideas, and learn to figure things out? These are the kinds of questions parents are asking.

One way that families can help is to provide an atmosphere in which children can learn. Instead of doing everything for the child, adults can provide experiences for the child to learn to do for themselves. These experiences begin in the preschool years.

The child as young as two years of age can begin to learn skills—skills in the kitchen, at the meal table, or in food buying. The brochure **PRESCHOOLERS FOOD HANDLING SKILLS** (348-011) tells how to teach preschoolers kitchen and table skills in handling equipment and in preparing and serving food. This brochure describes other activities to use with preschoolers—asking questions to stimulate thinking; providing choices to foster decision making; giving encouragement to try new ideas, to ask questions, and to solve problems; and providing time for feedback.

words and new meanings. Questions about naming colors and shapes will help the child discover new information and figure things out. From sensory experiences, children learn simple classifications, sweet foods or sour foods first—and then categories such as fruits and vegetables, or breakfast foods and snack foods. More complex categorization skills such as food groups develop from the simple classifications.

COLORS: As children learn colors, they can identify green in green beans, lettuce, peas, broccoli, grapes, and many other fruits and vegetables. In the same way, children can discover reds, oranges, yellows, browns, and many other colors. Ask, what color is the tomato? What other foods can you name that are red? They can discover that some foods are one color on the outside and another color on the inside (melons, apples, eggs). In the grocery store or in the home the child can name colors on packages or help make decisions when asked to pick a green vegetable for a meal.



LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Language development begins by learning new words and simple classifications and by learning simple relationships.

Simple questions at meal time about shapes, colors, and texture help the child learn new



SHAPES AND SIZES: As children learn about color through food, they will learn about shapes—square, round, oblong, and long. Round foods are coconuts, tomatoes, oranges, grapefruit, carrot circles, and melons. Some oblong foods are lemons, watermelons, and

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eggs. Green beans are long and skinny. Many slices of bread are square. At home or in the grocery store, the child also can describe shapes and sizes of foods and packages—rectangular or square boxes, or round cheeses, and round cans.

TEXTURE: Children's fingers can sense the rough surface of coconuts or oranges; the smooth egg shell or apple skin; the different textures of cereals and pastas before and after cooking. Children can feel the difference in texture between smooth flour, powdered sugar, grainy sugar, and rough salt. Grinding wheat to make flour or peanuts to make peanut butter are experiences that help children learn how food processing changes textures and appearances of food.

Heat and cold change the texture and form of food. Children can put water in the freezer to discover that it freezes to ice in very cold temperatures. Help them translate this information to other food experiences by asking what happens to food in the freezer or when making fruit juice or custard popsicles.

Children can learn that heat cooks food and melts fats. What happens to an egg in hot water? What happens to dumpling batter in hot water? What happens to chocolate, fat, or butter when it gets warmer or when it is in a hot frying pan? Asking questions and providing kitchen experiences help children discover food science and the process of figuring things out.

Hot water turns into steam. It is easy to blow up a balloon and figure out that air made the balloon get bigger. Children can watch water boil and become steam at very hot temperatures. Can you help the child learn that liquid in batters forms steam which helps make batters and doughs expand on baking? What makes corn pop? A more difficult concept is how baking powder or yeast produces a gas which helps batters and doughs expand.

TASTE: While children are learning how foods feel, they can be learning different tastes—most fruits are sweet, but some are sour. Other tastes are salty and bitter. As they identify tastes of many foods, they will begin to learn the tastes of spices and seasonings such as cinnamon, nutmeg, mint, and vanilla.

SMELLS AND SOUNDS: The smell of bacon frying, of bread baking, of baked beans cooking, or food burning are very familiar

aromas. Soon children can guess what is for dinner by the smell of food cooking.

Familiar sounds associated with food are fat spitting in the frying pan, pop corn popping, water boiling, or the crunchy noise when chewing raw celery, carrots, or crackers.

READING: During shopping trips to the grocery store or while unpacking grocery bags in the kitchen, the two- and three-year-old child begins reading by identifying pictures on food packages. Children learn to connect the picture on the package with what is inside. They also can tell some of the ways the food is used for eating.

As children learn to identify colors, shapes, and textures of fruits and vegetables, they can compare garden foods and packaged foods—fresh tomatoes, canned tomatoes, tomato paste, tomato juice, tomato catsup, and tomatoes in soups, stews and other dishes. In the grocery store, the kitchen, or the garden the child can begin to distinguish quality by looking for bruised or wilted spots on vegetables and fruits, dented cans or bulging cans, frozen foods that are soft, or packages that are broken.

Reading stories to children introduces ideas about people—how they live, what they eat, where food comes from, and simple concepts about growth and energy. Story books also are a good way to prepare children for field trips to gardens, farms, orchards, or dairies; or for new experiences in the kitchen or with other cultural groups. Don't be tempted to do all of the reading and all of the telling about the pictures and about the story. As children look at the pictures and listen to the stories, ask what the child is wearing. How is she/he like you? different from you? What is she/he eating?

Children love to tell stories and to talk about what is happening around them. Use story books, magazine pictures, or snapshots to have the child tell about the people in the picture—who are they? how old are they? what are they doing? how do they spend their day? Ask the child to name foods that various people in the pictures might eat. They will realize that babies and children need more milk than grownups; and that all age groups need the same kinds of foods.

By sorting clothes for different family members, children may enjoy describing the person who wears the clothes and what kind of

work the person does when wearing them—in the kitchen, in the garden, or doing other household tasks. Children love family pictures and talking about who is older, younger, bigger, smaller, and what activities the various family members do—sitting, walking, running, bending, stretching. They also can begin to figure out that people who are very active physically (e.g., playing football, digging, scrubbing) need more energy foods than people who are inactive (e.g., sitting at a desk, in front of the TV, or reading a book).

Children can discover pictures in magazines or on television of malnourished children and adults. Help them identify health differences by asking, “Are they fat or skinny?” “Are they active or inactive?” “What do they eat?” “Do the children have special doctors? medical clinics? school nurses?” “Why are they starving?” “Why don’t they have enough food to eat?”

Picture recipes are useful for four- or five-year-old readers who are developing pouring and measuring skills. Illustrate amounts by drawing measuring cups and spoons with marks to show how full to fill them. Children can follow the pictures to collect the ingredients and to figure out how much to use to prepare the recipe.

Here are some tips for selecting story books or recipe books for young children. Check for these qualities:

1. **NUTRITION**

Do 90% of recipes emphasize food for fitness *and* not fats & sugars?

2. **RELEVANCE**

Are the recipes typical for daily use *or* do they require extra ingredients?

3. **ROLE STEREOTYPING**

Do pictures and words show all family members planning, shopping, and cooking *or* only the mother and daughter?

4. **SKILL LEVEL**

Are skills suited to the age level *or* do half of the recipes depend on the adult to do hot, heavy, and sharp skills?

5. **READING LEVEL**

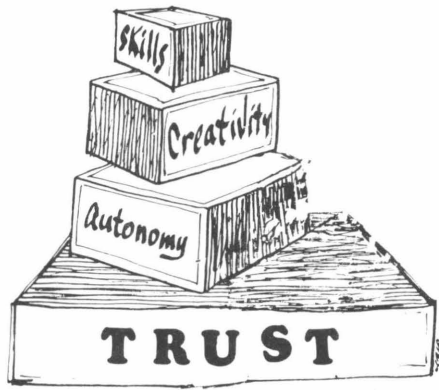
Do instructions illustrate steps by providing pictures *or* are higher level reading skills needed?

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MATH

While children are putting words and pictures together through recipes, they are beginning to learn numbers and simple math concepts.

- They are learning how to count one turn, two teaspoons baking powder, or three green beans, and so forth. As children learn to count, they can learn how many servings from the Basic Four are recommended from each food group.
- They are learning sequences—who gets the first turn stirring the muffins, who goes second, and who goes last, or by steps in mixing ingredients.
- They are learning simple concepts of division and multiplication—how to measure, how full to fill the measuring cup, or how to divide the batter in half or into muffin tins.
- They are learning how to tell time. Short times can be timed by 3-minute egg timers. Longer times can be measured by a 60-minute cooking timer.
- They are learning relationships—who is older? younger? bigger? smaller, shorter, taller? Children can keep track of how they grow in several ways. Many kinds of height/weight charts are available—fancy measures to tack on the wall or graphs on which to mark height and weight. Children also have fun being traced on a piece of paper or just tracing hands and feet as a record of how they grow. While children are learning about growing up, they can name parts of the body that grow. Hair and fingernails grow; arms and legs grow longer; the body grows new skin to repair cuts and scratches.



CREATIVE EXPRESSION

DRAMATIC PLAY: Dramatic play is a form of self-expression. Children use dramatic play to experiment, to express their feelings and their ideas, to discover new ways to do things, and to pretend. Playing house in the sandbox or in a play area or caring for dolls and teddy bears are familiar experiences to most people. Through dramatic play children are sorting out their ideas about what is happening around them, finding satisfaction, and having fun. It is also an excellent way for adults to learn what children are thinking about.

Whatever opportunities you provide for the children, remember two things: First, it is their show, so do not be tempted to tell children how to play the part. And second, although some may need adult help, don't force children to play.

ROLE PLAYING, SKITS, and PUPPET SHOWS are all forms of dramatic play. Each provides children the opportunity to play back what they learned on a field trip or from other special planned activities. Homes or preschools may have areas designed to be used as a grocery store, a kitchen, restaurant, bakeries, and so forth.

ART activities can be used to introduce food related concepts or to summarize ideas about field trips. Children can mold clay or play dough to look like different foods; they can fingerprint with fingerprints or pudding; they can make collages from seeds, nut shells, pastas, or grains;

they can draw pictures or make murals to tell about their field trip to the orchard or about special holiday celebrations. Muffins or salads can be decorated or designed for special events such as birthdays or holidays. Children can make natural dyes from berries, grapes, onion skins, red beets, and purple cabbage. These can be used with vegetable prints (making a design on a potato or apple) or to color Easter eggs.

Young children should not be made to feel that their design or their artwork has to look like something, as many are not in the representative stage of art development. Instead of asking, "Is it an apple?" or "What is it?" adults can say, "Tell me about your picture" or "Which is your favorite color in the picture?"

MUSIC is another way food and nutrition concepts can be introduced. Children enjoy music—beating on pots and pans, listening to the melodies from bedtime tunes or during daily life, and witnessing the movement of people or their environment. Jingles from ads and simple tunes and rhymes about brushing teeth, foods growing, or particular foods are fun for children to learn. They will also enjoy creative dance, whether copying the movements of those around them or pretending to be the wind blowing through the fields; water drops falling, bouncing, and rolling off food; or bubbles as food cooks.

PUZZLES and other games help children identify shapes and to learn new ideas. Adults can make simple puzzles for preschoolers out of wood or thick cardboard. Use pictures or outlines of food, of people, or other objects. Make each food or 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 together. Younger children can be learning the names of foods. Although you might write the names of key nutrients on the foods (calcium on milk and cheese; vitamin C on an orange; vitamin A on broccoli; iron and protein on meat and dried beans), it will be some time before the preschooler can read the names and comprehend that these are nutrients in the food that the body uses for growth, for health, and for energy.