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Food play policy

Encouraging children to eat and enjoy a healthy, varied diet and to develop positive nutritional behaviours is fundamental to their development. Many factors including increasing costs, the rise in the availability of processed foods, reduced cooking skills and busy lifestyles have all impacted on children's diets and ultimately their future wellbeing. Early years settings and schools have a significant role to play in shaping children's food preferences and developing behaviours around food choices and mealtimes. An ideal medium for children's learning is food play.

Food play provides an opportunity to expose children to foods they may not be familiar with, providing new tastes and textures. As children learn through their own experiences, planning opportunities for them to play and experiment with healthy foods can implicitly develop their understanding of the choices that are better for them.

Food play can be planned for a specific purpose, such as preparing a snack or lunch or it can simply be an opportunity for child-led learning as they explore through role play, food handling, songs and stories.

Some opportunities to plan

Sensory play

Children can increase their familiarity with different foods and develop their ability to identify them, increasing their awareness of textures, smells and colours. This could include homemade playdough, bread dough, whole fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices and cooking equipment such as whisks, mixing bowls and spoons.

Role play

The play environment could include a shop, café or kitchen, providing an opportunity to develop imaginative play and model behaviours. Including real foods can enhance the experience and develop vocabulary. Teaching children how to prepare meals helps shape their food preferences.

Growing herbs and vegetables

Growing herbs and vegetables in the garden encourages sensory play as well as giving children an understanding of where vegetables come from and encouraging children to take pride in what they have produced.

Cookery

Preparing food for a purpose can be an ideal opportunity to develop habits around food choices. Therefore, planning variety is key to helping children develop a range of food preferences. This provides a

great opportunity to wash, cut, mix and mash foods and can be linked to snacks or lunchtime, such as cutting up soft fruits or making a sandwich.

Food art

Food can be used to create a piece of art that can be eaten, such as soft berry butterflies or banana flowers. It can also be used as a printing/mark making tool. Vegetables such as potatoes, broccoli, corn on the cob and mushrooms can be used to make interesting patterns and shapes.

Stories and songs

Choose songs about food to engage children further and embed healthy choices. The internet is a great resource for finding new songs and include old favourites such as Five Little Peas, One Potato, Two Potato and Pat-a-cake.

Themes

There are many opportunities to widen food experience throughout the year linked to different seasons, festivals and celebrations. Many of these include certain foods and traditions that children find fascinating. Your parent body may also contribute by preparing dishes, cookery sessions, stories and songs.

Parents

Involving parents is key to supporting children. One innovative approach is to flip learning, where the children learn at home and then share the outcomes with their teacher and peers at nursery. Cooking at home can be a great opportunity for flip learning as children can bring their cooking into nursery to share with their peers which develops communication, model learning, self-esteem and parental relations.

Exposure to a variety of foods through play can be highly valuable for children in developing their nutritional behaviours and is interwoven into the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage within the three prime areas of communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development.

Food allergies in play

Children with any kind of food allergy will be brought to staff meeting to discuss any procedures to ensure their safety around these foods; this will also include any food play. Children with food allergies and dietary requirements are also clearly shown on the boards in the dining areas of the nursery. All staff members have a responsibility to ensure that when food is being used for play, these children are protected from any food they may have an adverse reaction to.

This policy was adapted in May 2023 and will be reviewed in 2024