

# Play Ideas

## Food glorious food

Eating is an experience which involves all of our senses. It is important to understand that we all process sensory information differently. What smells good to one person can be unpleasant to others. What feels comfortably warm to some may feel too hot for others. Children who refuse foods or have a very restricted diet may be dealing with a lot of environmental factors relating to the sensory experience of eating. Often what starts out as a sensory issue becomes a behavioural problem as the child learns that they can control what they eat. However for some children, there appears not to be a sensory element restricting their diet, and it is their dislike of change and preference for sameness that contributes to issues around food.

**NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde**

Play can be a great way to introduce different textures and smells without the pressure of mealtimes and taking away the expectation that any of it must be eaten. Some people may not agree with the use of food in these activities for ethical reasons and would prefer other resources to help children achieve the same learning. However, activities with food are used widely in nurseries and have been shown to be both enjoyable and supportive of the play and learning involved whilst taking ethical concerns into account.

### Starting off

Start with dry, plain foods e.g. pasta, rice, lentils, beans, whatever you have in the cupboard. If your child does not like touching different textures think about using utensils and containers so they don't have to e.g. spoons, tongs, scoops, cookie cutters/food containers. To add motivation and interest consider adding something they like e.g. a toy train or truck to drive through the food or a favourite character/doll/teddy/puppet to do the activities. Some children find it difficult to explore in play so introduce an activity you can model for them which provides a purpose/game and repeat it to help them feel more at ease with the activity. Follow their interests and try ideas like filling and emptying containers, counting the pieces, moving the food with a truck, finding small toys hidden in the food. As they become more confident and actively involved in the play try introducing other dry foods and then move on to offering them choices or mix two dried textures together. Adding a song or rhyme can also be helpful for some children e.g. 'If you're happy and you know it fill the tub/move the truck/scoop the food.'



### Moving on

Once a dry food has been accepted into play, try introducing something plain but cooked which will create a different texture, slightly different smell and possibly temperature. Remember to provide different utensils or toys just in case the new texture is challenging. If it's step too far try mixing a smaller amount of cooked food amongst the dry. Spoons, forks and knives can also give the opportunity to practise fine motor skills without the pressure of hunger and out with mealtimes.



### Taking it further!

To increase the challenge try adding something to the cooked food. You could extend the play experience by adding something with a different smell, texture, colour, temperature, etc. Not all at once!

Examples could include cold jelly, warm custard, chopped or mashed banana, different vegetables, frozen vegetables... but again not all at once!

Once confident with this play a new challenge could be to move away from the pasta onto other foods. Choice making would be a useful skill to practice building on independence and initiating play ideas. Visual symbol cards could help them to create their own 'recipes'.



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### Skills developed

- Learning about new foods in a 'safe' way
- Sensory play skills
- Daily living and fine motor skills
- Learning new vocabulary around texture, colour, shape, smell, temperature
- Preparing for eating away from home e.g. snacks and meals when visiting friends and relative, eating out, having snacks and meals in nursery or school

### Important

- Provide utensils so that there is no pressure to touch items
- Remember to model what to do, but allow for exploration when and if ready
- Sometimes you might need to just have the activity on display for a while to allow familiarisation with the look and smell of a different food before exploratory play
- Do not put on any pressure to eat but keep items clean in case anything is put to mouth, tasted or eaten
- If you know a child responds well to praise then do so, but for some praise can have a negative effect so modify your response

### More information

For more information around this topic including using cutlery and developing routines please see the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde website and their section on [Eating Meals](#) and their information sheet on [Fussy Eaters](#).

See also Highland Council's Occupational Therapy information sheet [Messy play and adventures with food](#).



### Understanding, assessing and influencing children's food choices

Dave Rex is a Dietician based at the Pines with expertise in dietary issues. [This video](#) includes the following topics:

- Knowing if a diet is good enough (1:43)
- How diet affects body and brain (9:10)
- Why do we eat the way we do: (20:15)
- How children can learn about nutrition (31:48)
- How to influence a selective eater (37:28)

### Food songs

Jelly on a plate  
Peas porridge  
Do you like broccoli ice cream?  
The Jeely Piece Song  
Mr Tumble, [Let's stay healthy!](#)

### Storytime

The Gingerbread Man  
The Enormous Turnip  
The Magic Porridge Pot  
The Very Hungry Caterpillar  
The Tiger Who Came to Tea  
[I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato](#)