

Kids in the kitchen – cooking experiences with children

by Sonja Tansey

Cooking activities can support many areas of children's learning and development, including language, literacy, numeracy, interpersonal and fine motor skills. They also offer educators great opportunities to talk with children about nutrition and healthy eating.

Cooking experiences can stimulate children's senses and enhance their learning about a wide range of concepts such as colours, shapes and numbers. Cooking allows children to experiment, solve problems and be creative in a relaxed environment where the focus is on enjoyment. It can also build confidence and help children to learn to take responsibility. Social skills such as taking turns, communicating and cooperating can be developed when working in a small group to prepare food.

Cooking and eating good food is an everyday pleasure but also an important and significant part of special occasions, celebrations and cultural and religious events. By involving children in cooking experiences that represent the backgrounds of families at the service and in the community, they can develop a deeper sense of the important role food plays in society.

Importantly, children's cooking experiences offer prime opportunities for them to develop an



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	2.2, 3.6, 4.1 and 4.2
OSHCQA Principles:	4.2, 4.3, 6.1, 6.2 and 7.2
QIAS Principles:	4.2-4.4, 5.3, 5.4 and 6.1-6.3

understanding and appreciation of healthy food and good food choices.

Cooking skills

Children can delight in chopping, mixing, juicing, mashing, peeling, grating, rolling, stuffing, shaping and baking a wide array of ingredients. Very young children can tear, break, snap and dip. Older children can be involved in wrapping, pouring and shaking, whilst school-age children, with close supervision, can develop a wide range of cooking skills including slicing and heating.

From garden to table

The joys and benefits of cooking fresh food with children can be deepened by creating gardens and pots for growing herbs, vegetables and fruit. By growing, cooking and eating food with children, educators encourage a strong connection with the source of food and the seasonal cycles of fresh produce. Taking time to taste new foods and relish new flavours fresh from the garden will also encourage children to enjoy eating healthy meals.

Inspiration can be drawn from local and overseas initiatives that integrate an understanding and enjoyment of food into curriculums for children. Stephanie Alexander's Kitchen Garden program at Collingwood College in Victoria and The Edible School Yard in California in the United States founded by Alice Waters, both encourage children to have hands on experiences in the kitchen and garden. Children harvest and prepare produce as part of their classroom experience and this fosters a deep appreciation of the natural world, promoting environmental awareness and social and physical well-being.

Enjoying the whole process

To enhance enjoyment of the whole process of cooking, encourage children to participate in planning menus, setting tables, purchasing or growing ingredients, serving meals, tidying up and eating meals together.

From start to finish:

- Read through the whole recipe before starting
- Gather all the necessary ingredients and utensils
- Set out utensils and make sure knives are set back on the bench with the blade facing away
- Weigh and measure your ingredients first
- Wash fruit and vegetables before eating or cooking
- Follow the recipe step-by-step
- Fill a basin half full with warm soapy water so items can be cleaned as they are used
- Keep the sink clear for washing and draining fruit and vegetables
- Involve everyone in cleaning up – wash knives carefully and never leave them at the bottom of the sink or basin
- Before eating, take a few moments to admire the food you have prepared by looking and smelling.

Safety and hygiene essentials

Good hygiene when growing, preparing and cooking food with children reduces the risk of cross infection and helps them develop good long term hygiene habits. A few simple hygiene rules should be reinforced every time educators cook with children. These include thorough handwashing and drying before and

after handling food, maintaining clean utensils and food preparation areas, having safe and hygienic food storage and refrigeration and following correct food waste composting and removal procedures.

Safe cooking and kitchen procedures should also be developed to ensure educators consistently protect children from risk and harm. Do not use sharp knives with young children – butter knives are a safer alternative. Take care with graters and mortar and pestles, and always remind children to keep their fingers clear. Use extreme care and close supervision when using ovens, stoves and hot pans with children.

Also make sure that children's allergies are taken into account when cooking, as some children can be highly allergic to contact with and consumption of particular foods such as eggs, nuts and dairy products.

Conclusion

Cooking activities offer endless opportunities for children to develop skills and to engage in interesting and often novel experiences. Educators can adapt cooking activities to suit children of varying ages and abilities and they can plan experiences to enhance children's knowledge and skills in specific areas, according to their strengths and interests ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

References and further reading

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Useful website

- Edible Schoolyard website: www.edibleschoolyard.org