

Food Play

Food play is a way for a child to become more comfortable around food. Food play allows a child to use their 5 senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch to learn about food. It is common for children to play with their food while learning to eat.

Why use food play?

You can help your child explore and learn to eat new foods by food play. If your child is uncomfortable eating new foods, food play may be a way for them to feel good when around food.

What do I need to know?

Your child can play with food to learn about eating.

There are many foods your child can play with. Choose leftovers and foods you have in your cupboard or pantry.

Food play is for playing only. Choose a time outside of mealtimes away from the table. This lets your child have fun with food without the expectation to eat or feeling any stress. If they are uncomfortable with an activity, stop or move on to another.

Let your child lead on whether to taste or eat the food during play time. Your child may get food on their hands when at play. They can decide on their own to taste or eat it, or wipe it off with a cloth. Parents or others should not push or pressure the child to taste or eat the food.

Foods to Avoid:

For children under 4 years of age, some foods can cause choking and aren't safe. These include hard candies, gum, popcorn, marshmallows, whole nuts or seeds, fish with bones, and any snacks using toothpicks or skewers.

Here are some ideas to help children play and learn about food smells, tastes, and textures.

Play a stacking game. If your child enjoys stacking games, use cereal, small chunks of cheese, chocolate squares, or crackers to make towers—see how high they can go.



You can ask your child to count or sort foods by colours, shapes, and types.

Make new shapes. Use cookie cutters to make different shapes with cheese slices, deli or roasted meats, dough, bread, tortillas, or pancakes. Stack the shapes, or use them to make a picture.



Make patterns and pictures. Use vegetables, fruit like raisins, cheese puffs, pasta, nuts like sliced almonds, dried beans, chocolate chips, or 'O' shaped cereal to make patterns, pictures, roads or lines.



Create funny faces. Use vegetables and fruit such as tomatoes or kiwi as eyes. For hair and beards use blueberries, kale, or spinach. Use broccoli for ears and strawberries or sugar snap peas for the mouth. Use salad dressing as glue.



Make a house out of food. Use graham crackers for the base, peanut butter or honey for glue, and square wheat cereal for the chimney, windows, or sidewalk.

Make jewellery, designs, or roadways from coloured noodles. Change the colour of cooked noodles by adding food colour drops, chocolate pudding mix or coloured drink crystals.

Play counting games. Use crackers, cookies, fruit, or vegetables to see how many your child can hold in their cupped hands. Then count and sort or measure them. This helps your child to touch food with their whole hand.



Play with cars, trucks, and blocks in 'mud.' Use ketchup, pudding, yogurt, or other liquid foods as 'mud' and run toys like cars, trucks, and blocks through the 'mud' to make tracks.

Pretend to fish. Make a ‘sea’ with a piece of paper. Put cereal ‘O’s’, puffed wheat, rice crisp cereal, raisins, cake sprinkles and other small foods on the paper. Tie a lollipop to a string and lick it to make it sticky, then ‘fish’ for the foods in the sea.



Play with coloured water. Mix flavoured drink crystals with water for water play. You can also use custard powder or cornstarch. If your child gets water onto their hands or mouth, they may taste the drink.

Have a tea party or picnic. Your child may want to include their dolls or stuffed animals (like, dinosaurs or cats) in food play too. You can encourage them to have a tea party or picnic with these ‘friends’.

Make string art with food. Help your child rub a coloured, wet, sticky food like hummus, jelly, ketchup, nut butter, spaghetti sauce, yogurt, or chocolate pudding on a long piece of string. Use the string to make patterns on a large piece of paper on the floor or wall.

Use play dough that you can eat. Mix in cocoa, cinnamon, vanilla, icing sugar, or flavouring like peppermint, coconut, or almond to give the dough a smell. Use the dough to cut out shapes and roll balls, or stick items in the dough that your child can pull out. Make your own recipe or use the one below.

Edible Play Dough Recipe

1 cup	baby cereal with iron	250 mL
1 cup	cornstarch	250 mL
½ cup	water, fruit juice or applesauce	125 mL
3 Tbsp	vegetable oil	45 mL
½ tsp	flavouring like vanilla or peppermint	2 mL
Drops	food colour (optional)	

In a medium bowl, combine baby cereal and cornstarch. Stir well. Mix water and oil together. Add flavouring and/or food colour drops if using. Add water and oil mixture to cereal mixture, and stir until it forms a ball. Knead the dough in bowl until it is smooth and easy to shape. If dough is sticky, add a small amount of cereal and mix again. Repeat this step as needed. If the dough dries and cracks, wet your hands and knead the dough. Unused dough can be stored in the fridge for 24 hours. Throw dough in the trash after playing.

Follow your child’s lead

Ask your child about their ideas for food play. Explore, be curious, and have fun. Remember these activities are meant to help your child enjoy being around food.



Look for buried treasure. Fill a bucket with dry oatmeal, dry beans, or coloured pasta. Have your child bury a few small toys inside, mix it up, and then find the toys. A next step is to add water to the mix and have your child find toys in the wet mixture. This is harder. Let your child use a spoon if needed.

Play with gelatin dessert crystals. Sprinkle flavoured gelatin dessert crystals on a piece of paper. Use fingertips to lick the crystals to discover the colour and flavour!

Paint with food. Using a surface you can wipe, such as a tray, mirror, or place mat, create pictures using the following foods. Your child may also want to use their fingers in the ‘paint’.



Paint with:	Brush with:	Stamp with:
Peanut butter	Bread sticks	Apple slices
Pudding	Broccoli	Banana slices
Ketchup	Carrot sticks	Carrot shapes
Yogurt	Cheese strings	Potato pieces
Hummus	Licorice pieces	Strawberries

Face paint using yogurt or pudding. Let your child watch as you paint your arms and face, then let your child do the same. Look in the mirror so they can see their face. Make funny clown faces in the mirror.



Pretend to play music with food. A carrot, celery, parsnip, or licorice stick can be a flute or recorder. A banana can act as a trumpet or microphone.