

Food Play: Using the resource

(What you need to know)

What is the purpose of this resource?

This resource *404101-NFS Food Play* was developed as an education tool to support dietitians working with children with feeding difficulties.

Some children:

- struggle being around food, therefore, eating can be very stressful. They find it difficult to interact with and eat food.
- are more anxious than their peers and may like to learn about new things slowly. They may require more time to become familiar with a food before they are ready to taste or eat it.

A child with feeding difficulties may receive and process sensory feedback differently than other children, and thus struggle with any of the sensory properties of a food including sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. These children can struggle a lot or a little.

Sensory food play can be adapted to each child and family circumstances to provide child led, no-pressure opportunities to explore foods.

When do I use this strategy?

Food play is one feeding therapy technique that can be used to teach children about food but it is not a requirement and it may not work for every family.

It is common for young children to play with their food as they learn to eat. This strategy can be applied across all age groups if age-appropriate activities are chosen. It is commonly used in *feeding therapy* for children less than 6 years of age.

Use food play with:

- a child experiencing feeding difficulties
- a child with feeding delays
- a child who has difficulties touching or interacting with certain food textures (i.e., has a meltdown when wet foods touch their hands; refuses to eat foods when a non-preferred food is on the same plate)

Feeding therapists can suggest specific sensory food play activities to match the sensory experience that the child needs to build on.

The food play activities listed in general are from least to most difficult in terms of the child's sensory experience.

What about food waste?

Some families may have concerns that food will be wasted during food play. Special, novelty or costly food items are not always or necessarily the best choices for food play. Small portions of food can still provide a sensory experience. Less costly foods, or foods that can already be found within the home, are great options to use.

Food play can take on many forms and can use many different types and volumes of food, depending on the resources available to a family.

Working with parents, the food choices can be discussed to ensure they are appropriate and comfortable, for both the child and parents. Using leftovers or a small quantity of foods that a family commonly purchases is a way to keep food waste low. Tailor feeding therapy to fit each individual child and family.

What about playing with food at mealtimes?

It is recommended that food play be done at a time separate from regular mealtimes so there:

- is no pressure for the child to eat the food.
- are boundaries between playing with food during food play sessions and eating at mealtimes.

Some forms of food interactions can be appropriate at a mealtime. For example, a one year old is likely to mash food with their hand and smear food on their body or an older child who eats a very limited selection of foods may pick up and explore new foods with their hands.

How much food interaction is tolerated at mealtimes by parents may vary slightly from family to family based on what is acceptable within each household. Parents can teach a child what is and is not acceptable at eating times. Dietitians can provide guidance and support to implement these boundaries for each individual family.

How were the food items used for food play activities chosen?

A variety of foods have been chosen based on the sensory properties these foods provide.

This resource focuses on exploring foods and the child's experience with foods. Nutrition is not the only priority. Foods that are more nutritious can be used as often as possible, but there are times that less nutritious food items provide the desired sensory experience for the activity. The foods selected may also reflect those that children are somewhat familiar with or items families already have at home.