

"GO AHEAD.... PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD"

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For years, kids have been listening to their parents well meaning requests to get a handle on mealtime etiquette. However, there are times when playing with food is the solution to mealtime challenges. "Playing" with food can certainly be messy, wasteful and in some ways disrespectful to the cook who put in so much time and energy into the preparation. It is difficult to accept sauce on the shirt, pears in the hair, and pudding on the wallpaper, but playing with your food can be an important learning experience in more ways than one.

For many individual reasons, some children have difficulty with mealtimes. The sights, smells, sounds and touch and texture aspects of mealtimes can be especially challenging for children who have had a negative experience with food or sensory processing difficulties. Some children with special medical or health care needs have developed a poor relationship with food. Food allergies, gastroesophageal reflux,

nausea, diarrhea, constipation can all affect appetite and willingness to eat. Sometimes, children may not have the appropriate motor skills to manage certain foods, putting them at risk for overstuffing their mouth, choking, and gagging on the foods creating a scary and very emotional experience around mealtimes.

It is important to help children regain trust around food and around mealtime experiences. There are a variety of ways to help build this trust along a continuum of acceptance.

Preparation and Handling

Simple preparation and handling of the food can help some children adjust to an uncomfortable mealtime situation in a safe and unthreatening way. Have the child participate by:

- Choosing and handling food at the grocery store and then putting it away at home
- Washing fruits and vegetables
- Pushing buttons on the blender or food processor
- Scooping and pouring ingredients and helping mix
- Picking out the ingredients for salads or casseroles and placing in the bowl
- Setting the table, serving or passing out foods

- Use a pizza roller or rocker knife to help cut fruit or veggies for soups or salads
- Use a potato masher to mash cooked potatoes, sweet potatoes
- Feeding dolls, animals, others during play or tea party
- Help make crumbs for pie crust or dirt cake
- Child safe spreader to spread peanut butter, jelly, cream cheese on bread, crackers, etc
- Pizza faces on English muffins with olive slices as eyes and bell pepper strips for mouth, etc.

Food Arts and Crafts

Be creative using food as components of with **arts and crafts**.

- Use straws to blow at drops of grape juice, berry juice, etc or make spatter prints on paper
- Finger paint with pudding
- Use honey, ketchup, jelly to lips and kiss the paper making lip prints for cards or stationary
- Crush ripe or frozen berries in a baggie and use the colors as paints
- Do tongue painting by dipping tongue in kool-aid and wiggling on the paper

- Peanut butter on pinecones with sunflower seeds to set out for the birds

Food as a Learning Tool

You can use food as a game or as a learning tool by:

- Sorting and matching colored fruit loops, goldfish crackers, etc
- Make a sandwich puzzle and then putting it back together
- String Cheerios, fruit loops, onion rings, etc on coffee stirrers, pretzel sticks, or licorice strings
- Cookie cutter shapes can be used with cheese slices, pancakes, bread into circles, squares and triangles
- Stack crackers, cheese cubes, chicken nuggets, etc
- Slice firm fruit and vegetables (strawberries, red potatoes, broccoli, mushrooms) lengthwise and dip into paint (ketchup, mustard, jelly) for stamp crafts
- Broccoli and asparagus could be used as paint brushes too
- Cookie or cracker crumbs can be used with glue to create sand art

- Use a potatoes or apple to create body parts and faces with other foods (pretzel arms, licorice lips, olive nose, spaghetti hair, etc)
- Graham cracker or Nilla® wafer crumbs, rice, beans can all be substituted for sand in a sandbox and used to hide toys or other food items like gummy worms, gold fish crackers, and dried fruit
- Who can slurp up a variety of noodles lengths the fastest?

Creative Food Presentation

Creative and fun food presentation takes the edge off of eating and turn the focus on the designs of novelty. Lots of great books and websites are available to help stimulate creativity and provide fun ideas for particular eaters.

- Dips and spreads are a great way to disguise "healthy" foods. Integrate with more accepted foods like bread, tortilla strips, crackers, or simply lick the tastes off of a utensil or a veggie stick.
- Ants on a log with celery sticks filled with cream cheese or peanut butter topped with raisins is a longtime favorite

- Potato, avocado, squash, orange, cantaloupe “boats” can be filled with a fun combination of food blends or salads
- Frozen fruit and fruit blends in a homemade Popsicles, Dixie cups with sticks or ice cube trays with a $\frac{1}{2}$ of a coffee stirrer as a handle are a hit in the summer.
- Colored or seasonal sprinkles on fruit, yogurt, pudding, cream cheese and crackers, peanut butter dips etc.
- Also see the following resources:
 - Feed Me, I'm Yours by Vicky Lansky
 - First Meals by Annabel Karmel
 - Secrets to Feeding a Healthy Family by Ellyn Satter
 - The Sneaky Chef by Missy Chase Lapine
 - <http://www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers/index.html>
 - <http://www.mypyramid.gov/kids/index.html>
 - <http://kidshealth.org/parent/recipes/index.html>
 - <http://www.bettycrocker.com/recipes/event-or-occasion/kids-recipes>
 - <http://familyfun.go.com/recipes/>
 - <http://www.bhg.com/recipes/childrens-favorites/>
 - <http://www.parents.com/recipes/>

Novel Mealtime Place Settings

Mealtime tools such as crazy straws, cocktail forks, character forks and spoons, chopsticks, bowls with built in straws, toothpicks with umbrellas, and picnic playware can change up the routine and make it more fun to eat.

- Simple mouthing toys or baby teething toys can be dipped in a variety of flavors or textures.
- Using mini tea sets with dolls or teddy bears. Serving real food on the tiny trays can be more tolerable and better accepted
- Favorite character plates and utensils
- Use a variety of fun and festive straws for bubble blowing or sipping up soups, pureed textures, Jello®, etc.
- Chinese soup spoons can be used to fish for letters or creatures out of a soup
- Blended smoothies with fruit, veggies, yogurt are more fun through a crazy straw
- Soft cooked veggies, fruit, cheese cubes, diced chicken, beans, mini meatballs, avocado squares, mini tortellini or ravioli can be stabled with toothpicks and dunked into a variety of sauces or dips.

- Kabobs are not only fun to assemble but there are a variety of creative ways to eat them too.
- Tongs or learning chopsticks can be fun for picking up foods
- Have a special bowl to spit out new foods that the child might reject initially. Knowing that they can get rid of it makes trying it a little bit safer.

Get out of the kitchen!

- Go outside and have a watermelon seed spitting contest
- Carry eggs or grapes on a spoon for a relay race
- Use a mirror to apply ketchup, jelly, pudding lipstick for the girls
- Using straws, blow marshmallows, Kix® cereal, etc through a "goal", a "road", or an obstacle course taped to the floor or a coffee table
- Try picnics or eating out in novel places such as on a porch swing, in a tent or fort, on the living room floor, at a park, etc.

So, playing with food and finding creative ways to interact with food can take the pressure off food interactions for those children who are having some sensory mealtime challenges. Make it fun!!

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