Prepare Healthy Foods With Toddlers

“Prepare Healthy Foods With Toddlers”

“My turn to stir!”
“I do it!”
“I want more of these!”
“Mmmmm!”
“Yay!”

These are a few of the comments young children make when they prepare food with a little help from their teachers and families. Toddlers—from about 16 to 36 months—can learn a variety of skills as they prepare food and follow recipes in developmentally appropriate ways (Izumi-Taylor & Morris, 2007; Taylor & Dodd, 1999).

Current health risks such as obesity have led family members and early childhood educators to give more attention to choosing healthy foods. Because children’s eating habits are learned early (Izumi-Taylor & Morris, 2007; Marotz, Cross, & Rush, 2005), it is best to introduce various foods and tastes while they are young. Healthy eating experiences from the start set the stage for children’s choice of nutritious food in later years (Jarosh, Phelan, Dwyer, Ziegler, & Hendricks, 2006; Satter, 2011).

Early childhood teachers are encouraged to support young children’s healthy eating habits by offering simple food preparation experiences. All activities recommended here have been implemented with toddlers, with some modifications based on classroom teachers’ suggestions. Involve children’s families whenever possible—from providing ingredients to helping supervise the activity.

Although some adults may avoid giving toddlers the opportunity to experience cooking because they think younger children tend to make a mess (Izumi-Taylor & Morris, 2007), the benefits far outweigh the need for cleaning up any mess.

Why Prepare Food With Toddlers?

Toddlers enjoy and participate in simple and developmentally appropriate food preparation activities that are chosen “based on what we know about the development and learning of children within a given age range” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 6). Through such activities, children experience:

• joy of food preparation,
• sense of accomplishment, and
• pleasure of tasting different food from diverse cultures (Taylor & Dodd, 1999).

Toddlers explore the world using their five senses, so cooking activities provide them with multi-sensory experience as they touch, smell, taste, see, and even hear food (Colker, 2005). They experience different food textures including slimy, crunchy, gritty, or mushy.

When children prepare food that they then eat, they naturally develop their own sense of good nutrition. The foods suggested in this article are nutritious (American...
Al-though all of the recipes included here require no heat source, the term cooking is used interchangeably with food preparation.

Cooking activities can involve everyone in an enjoyably creative experience. During the process, adults model their appreciation for and enjoyment of a variety of healthy foods (Marotz, Cross, & Rush, 2005). Their example influences children’s thoughts and behaviors regarding new tastes, textures, and smells.

Cooking activities support toddlers’ development of healthy eating habits, as well as three kinds of knowledge:

• physical,
• logico-mathematical, and
• social (DeVries, Zan, Hildebrant, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002).

Toddlers can learn about physical properties of food such as fuzzy, smooth, crisp, soft, and colorful (Taylor & Dodd, 1999). When children wash, cut, and eat bits of celery, for example, they experience the hard, crisp, ridged, crunchy aspects of this green vegetable.

While cooking, toddlers synthesize logico-mathematical knowledge as they measure amounts, notice shapes, combine ingredients, observe changes in the texture and color of the mixture, and chart their preferences.

Teachers promote toddlers’ social knowledge as they talk about names of foods, describe steps in food preparation, learn rules for hygiene and dining, explore cultural traditions regarding the creation of certain foods, and follow safety precautions during preparation and cooking.

Culture plays an important role in food and dietary habits, so teachers and children’s families are urged to maintain open communication about their “home practices, familial values and attitudes, and cultural approaches to food and feeding young children” (Branscombe & Goble, 2008, p. 33).

Start on a Nutritious Path

Toddlers’ developmental task levels are a primary consideration when planning food preparation activities. There are a great many tasks that toddler cooks can learn, as shown in the sidebar. (next page)

Setting up a snack center with regular snack times every morning and afternoon might be a first step to introduce food preparation with toddlers (Colker, 2005; Parlakian & Lerner, 2007). Try to be as economically and environmentally responsible as possible. Consider using individually labeled fabric napkins and unbreakable, washable dinnerware rather than disposables.

Choose simple, healthy snacks that children make and serve on their
Toddlers Learn These Food Preparation Skills

- record grocery lists
- shop
- make choices
- follow picture recipes
- wash
- measure
- stir
- sprinkle
- tear
- scoop
- cut (with plastic dinnerware)
- pour
- toss
- roll
- spread
- wrap
- mash
- serve

Food preparation activities are easily related to children’s literature (Izumi-Taylor & Morris, 2007). To follow up, a teacher could read aloud Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1987). Children might prepare a cream cheese spread, mix up fruit parfaits, or form “caterpillars” on a lettuce leaf (see the recipe section).

Mrs. Jackson read her toddlers *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, pointing out the colorful foods the caterpillar ate. She asked if the children would like to create their own very hungry caterpillars. They all nodded excitedly and eagerly went to the cooking table.

As they spread soft cream cheese on their whole-wheat crackers, Rashida said, “A birthday cake!”

William said, “Mmm!”

Christelle shouted, “A butterfly!” as she put her crackers with cream cheese on a lettuce leaf.

This section offers a number of simple, nutritious recipes that toddlers can easily follow with an adult’s leadership. While many of the ingredients are familiar, teachers are urged to consider introducing a broader range of healthy foods such as pine nuts, hummus, tofu, and lentils.

**Healthy, Easy Recipes**

There are many snacks that toddlers can prepare for themselves—they simply need the opportunity and a little adult guidance. See the sidebar for some basic guidelines for cooking together. Families may be happy to have a copy of these suggestions as well.

**Guidelines for Food Preparation With Toddlers**

- Display recipes to create opportunities for children’s literacy and math skills to develop. Write recipes on large paper so all children can see. Use pictures and numerals as well as words.
- Adapt recipes to incorporate local produce, traditional foods, and new tastes. Trail mix, for example, can be made from all sorts of combinations of whole-wheat crackers, whole-grain cereals, and dried fruits.
- Wash hands.
- Choose safe tools, such as wide craft sticks, plastic dinnerware, and unbreakable measuring cups and mixing bowls. Model the safe use of all tools.
- Arrange all ingredients and tools so they are easily accessible.
- Read and point out each step in the recipe. Connect print to the ingredients and steps to follow by writing experience stories, inventing new recipes, and charting children’s preferences.
- Make sure children are fully engaged in every step. Resist the urge to do tasks for them to avoid a mess or move the activity along.
- To avoid choking hazards, cut foods such as grapes, raw vegetables, and meat into 1/2-inch chunks. Do not serve popcorn to children younger than age 4. Insist that children sit while they eat.
- Describe each item as it is added. Talk about its name, color, shape, and texture. “You’re pouring the raisins from the measuring cup. See how some raisins are tiny and others are bigger. They’re ALL wrinkly and brown. Yum—these dried grapes are really going to be a treat.”
- Closely supervise toddlers as they work.
**Hungry Caterpillar Fruit Parfaits**

**Ingredients**
- Yogurt (preferably low fat or Greek)
- Whole-grain, unsweetened cereal
- Fresh or dried fruits
- Cups
- Spoon and plastic dinnerware

Various fruit combinations are possible, so just two variations are given here as examples. Name the recipe to match a topic or the children’s interests. For example, use either of the following recipes but arrange ingredients in the bowl or cup differently and call them by another name. A fruit parfait can easily become Split Bananas or a Blueberry Breakfast Bowl. Teachers also can introduce less familiar fruit choices, including star fruit, papaya, kiwi, mangos, kumquats, and fresh coconut.

Children stir the yogurt, cut up the fruits, and crush the cereal if needed. Children spoon alternating layers of yogurt, fruit, and cereal in cups.

*Variation:* Stir the ingredients and then sprinkle other small bits of fruit or crunchy cereal on top of the parfaits.

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**Bugs in a Boat**

In addition to the familiar celery, peanut butter, and raisin treat called Ants on a Log, teachers might try celery, cream cheese, and dried cranberries. A clever name such as Bugs in a Boat further encourages toddlers to eat their creations. With very young toddlers, teachers are urged to cut the celery sticks into bite-size pieces or use bread sticks.

Chant the nursery rhyme “Rub-A-Dub-Dub, Three Men in a Tub” or sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” while preparing the boats to add a very logical and enjoyable language and musical component to this learning experience.

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**Smashing Colors**

**Ingredients**
- Cooked or soft vegetables and/or fruits of the same color (carrots and sweet potatoes, peas and green beans, fresh blueberries and cooked purple potatoes or beets, bananas and cooked yellow squash or potatoes)
- Snack-size zipper plastic bags
- Wood mallets or small rolling pins
- Spoons

Children each count out two bags. They place small amounts of the same-color food in each bag, such as carrots in one bag and sweet potatoes in the other. Help children seal their bags.

Demonstrate how to gently smash the vegetables in the bag. Children smash the food.

Children open their bags, scoop out, and taste the smashed food.

Ask children to name the foods tasted and how they look and taste alike and different, both before and after mashing.

Children vote on the favorite vegetable they tasted. Record the votes on a chart that children can interpret and understand.

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*Read and point out each step in the recipe. Connect print to the ingredients and steps to follow by writing experience stories, inventing new recipes, and charting children’s preferences.*
Stretch Imaginations and Curiosity

Toddlers tend to be very literal, so teachers can use children’s books and discussions about recipes, for example, to encourage their imaginations. Here are two ideas to try.

• Spread cream cheese or nut butter on toast, crackers, or lettuce leaves. Stand animal crackers in the spread to create an animal parade.

• Spread round, square, or triangle crackers with soft cheese, all-fruit spread, or nut butter to pique interest in geometric shapes. Top with dried fruits, vegetable bits, diced meat, or cheese.

Pick Up on Books and Themes

Recipes can easily be modified to enhance the curriculum and expand upon children’s favorite books. Imaginative teachers can modify the following examples in many ways.

Prepare this recipe (top right) after reading the wonderful Brown Bear book (Martin, 1995). Talk about the math involved (halves, squares, counting, circles) as well as the literature connections.

Brown Square, Brown Square, What Do You See?

**Ingredients**
- Graham crackers
- Sugar-free chocolate pudding
- Bananas
- Wide craft sticks
- Small plates

Children break graham crackers in half to form squares. Each child takes one cracker. Children spread pudding on their crackers.

Children cut circular slices from the banana and place slices on their crackers.

Ask children to repeat “Brown Square, Brown Square, what do you see?” Children describe what they see, before they enjoy their treats.

**Alternatives:** Invent variations with other colors and shapes. For white squares, use saltine crackers, cream cheese or cottage cheese, and apple slices. Round Bears could be made using circular whole-grain crackers spread with hummus and cut-vegetable shapes for ears.

Grinning Apples

**Ingredients**
- Red apples
- Apple corer (adult use only)
- Plastic knives
- Sunbutter (ground sunflower seeds)
- White cheese slices
- Small plates

An adult cores the apples. Children slice them into wedges (adult assistance may be needed) and take two slices each.

Children cut cheese into tooth-shaped bits.

Children spread sunbutter on one apple slice. They top this with a row of teeth (cheese) sticking out of the red side. Place the other apple slice on top—with red side facing out. The apples look like grinning lips with teeth.

**Variations:** Substitute peanut butter or any other kind of nut butter.

Carrot & Raisin Salad

**Ingredients**
- Carrots
- Low-fat yogurt (or low-fat sour cream, mayonnaise, or Greek yogurt)
- Grater or food processor (adult use only)
- Raisins
- Mixing bowl and spoon
- Cups
- Spoons

Children wash the carrots. An adult grates them. Children spoon out and mix carrots, raisins, and yogurt. Spoon into individual cups.
Try Something Silly

Young children love to pretend, especially when it involves something unusual. This recipe is a bit messy, but its name sounds silly and the shaping process is great fun for children. Use this recipe along with exploring children’s books about dogs, such as Dog Biscuit (Cooper, 2009) or talking about children’s pets.

Dog-Bone Treats

Ingredients

- Whole-grain crackers
- Fruit- or vegetable-flavor soft cream cheese
- Zipper sandwich bags
- Spoons
- Plates

Each child takes one sandwich bag. Ask children to count four (depending on size) crackers and put them inside bag. Help children zip their bags.

Children use their hands to crush crackers.

Children add 1 or 2 spoons of cream cheese to the cracker crumbs. Mix by squeezing the bag.

Children empty contents of bag onto plate. They use their hands to shape the food into a dog bone.

Alternatives: Mix cream cheese with bits of fruit or veggies that the children cut up. Use a little fruit juice to soften the cream cheese for spreading.

Add food coloring and matching fillings to create Great Green Grapes or Orange Oranges, for example.

Encourage children to make their own odd or silly shapes out of the mixture, such as giant ant hills or car tires.

Invite Family Members

Cooking activities are especially fun and educational when family members and children work together. Creative teachers who invite families to share lunch using the following two toddler-friendly recipes can help families better understand how to support children’s learning at home, every day, in the kitchen.

Let’s Wrap-a-Wrap

Ingredients

- Whole-grain wraps
- Low-fat meat slices, such as ham, turkey, or roast beef
- Sliced cheeses
- Lettuce
- Mayonnaise or salad dressing
- Plastic dinnerware
- Plates

Children help place all ingredients and utensils within easy reach.

Together, children and family members spread out a wrap for each person. Select meat(s) and cheese(s) and place on wrap. Spread on sauce.

Creatively wrap-a-wrap and enjoy!

Variation: Children enjoy this activity when they learn a simple rap song to teach to their families.
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Ice Cream Social

Ingredients (for each person)
- ½ cup milk
- ¼ cup half and half
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 zipper sandwich bag
- 1-gallon size zipper bag
- 2 cups ice
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt
- Measuring spoons and cups

Children measure and place milk, half and half, and sugar in the smaller plastic bag. Seal carefully.

Place small bag inside the large bag. Add ice and salt. Seal the bag carefully.

Shake the bags until the mixture freezes.

Suggestion: Children could place mittens or recycled, clean socks on their hands if the bags seem too cold to handle.

Food preparation with toddlers is such an engaging vehicle for meeting children’s developmental needs. Toddlers learn healthy eating habits; social competence; and skills in math, science, literacy, and creativity (Colker, 2005).

Some of the children who prepared the recipes in this article talked about their experiences with their families, who then asked for the recipes so they could cook at home. After getting the recipes, one parent said, “I didn’t know how to cook with my 2-year-old without heat, but now I know how.”

Obesity and unhealthy eating by everyone, young and old, are national problems. One partial solution is to help the very young develop nutritious eating habits. Early childhood professionals are advocates who consider all aspects of children’s development and nurture children’s healthy bodies as well as their minds.

References


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Connect Toddler Food Preparation With a Children’s Book

Tracy Anne Jones, Ed.D.

**Pancakes, Pancakes!**
written and illustrated by Eric Carle.

The vibrant artwork in this classic Eric Carle story delights even adults who are likely to read the story over and over again! Jack wakes up hungry for breakfast and ready for a big plate of pancakes, but first he has to help his mom to get all the ingredients to make those yummy pancakes. Children will be captivated as Jack gets closer and closer to eating his homemade pancake.

Classroom Ideas!

*Pancakes, Pancakes!* is a very versatile book, and a perfect compliment to the curriculum for toddlers who are exploring food preparation. **Before doing any food activity, ask families about children's ALLERGIES. Any ingredient could cause a reaction, especially in toddlers who are trying new foods.**

**MATH:** Making pancakes with toddlers requires a focus on safety and plenty of volunteers, but is a great opportunity to give children hands-on cooking experience. Focus on math as children measure and mix the ingredients. Talk about how much and how many, big and small, more than and less than. Offer a variety of flavors such as blueberry, apple, banana, or plain, and ask children to pick their favorite. Create a bar chart of a graph to talk about in circle time. Or list toddlers’ names next to photos or drawings of their favorite fruits.

**HEALTH AND SAFETY:** Whenever foods are served with children, make an opportunity to talk about nutrition. Point out foods that help children grow big and strong, and foods to eat less of. Children can create picture collages of healthy foods. Expand toddlers’ vocabularies about both foods and body parts (bones, teeth).

**MOVEMENT & MUSIC:** Children enjoy pretending to flip pancakes with any large spatulas or table tennis-type racquets and beanbags. This experience improves hand-eye coordination and is best done outside!

**ART:** Discuss what children like to put in their pancakes. They can draw pancakes and add the fruit. An adult can write down all the things they want to put into their pancakes on their art. Consider trying some interesting new pancake ideas! Toddlers can also draw or tear out pictures of other foods they eat for breakfast.

**LITERACY:** Add simple picture books and board books on food to the library center. Family photo books of toddlers’ favorite foods or photos of families eating provide excellent opportunities for young children to relate new concepts and vocabulary to their own experiences.

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