Director’s Corner: Exploring Cooking

Cooking explorations in early childhood can lay a firm foundation for healthy and more economical food choices throughout life. The first step is involving children in the parts of cooking that fit their motor skills and cognitive abilities. For example, I got a text from my daughter recently saying that her 14-month-old’s favorite activities were tearing paper and putting things in bowls, so they put her to work making salad. There was an accompanying video clip of Lucia happily shredding a head of lettuce with both hands. Though not all of it went into the bowls, she was clearly thrilled with being actively involved and appreciated. Just imagine what our preschoolers and kindergartners can do!

Helping in the kitchen builds valuable Interaction & Cooperation skills for following directions and routines, sharing the work, using polite manners, etc. Cooking experiences are also great opportunities for children to learn new vocabulary for foods, ingredients, utensils, and actions, as well as to begin decoding the print on food packaging and in cookbooks (Communication). Regarding Discovery & Exploration, children get a chance to use all of their senses when cooking, to learn about cause and effect relationships as they explore how utensils and appliances work, to practice diverse ways to measure ingredients and time, and to experience mistakes as part of the learning process. There are many opportunities to build Physical Capabilities while cooking, from movements necessary for slicing, stirring, pouring, etc., as well as those necessary for wiping surfaces and washing dishes. Naturally, there are also Health & Safety lessons to be learned in the kitchen, particularly with respect to sharp or hot surfaces, food storage, nutrition, and allergies. Becoming competent in the kitchen increases children’s Independence, which in turn fosters Self-Esteem, particularly if they are recognized for their contributions and encouraged to learn to make the traditional family meals that become part of special occasions. That’s often where the more Artistic side of cooking can be experienced while helping with food presentation, table-setting, etc.

As with all explorations, adults need to blend a variety of teaching strategies appropriate to the child’s level of skill and the context. Initially, children need direct instruction to learn the basic cooking terms and techniques, particularly for tasks involving safety concerns. With the basics well in hand, they can learn much from observing adult demonstrations, as well as from straightforward hints regarding strategies for handling common challenges. With a solid skill set and appropriate supervision, children can then enjoy the more creative side of cooking by testing novel variations, using typical techniques with atypical ingredients, etc. That’s how creative chefs have developed entire grilled cheese and tomato soup restaurants, for example (http://www.tomandchee.com).

Cooking with adults who model a willingness to try new recipes with novel ingredients also helps children become more adventurous eaters. Be sure you have enough ingredients available to allow children small tastes as you prepare each ingredient, as well as after ingredients are combined. That way, they can discover that the wonderful vanilla flavor in ice cream and other baked items does not taste very good by itself or that many foods can be cooked to taste savory or sweet depending on the spices added. If a food is not initially to a child’s liking, it may take 8-10 tries before a positive response. Be persistent in offering a range of foods, especially at the beginning of meals when the child is most hungry, and be ready to encourage the attempt without forcing. Involving your child in shopping for or even growing foods also encourages tasting. Bon appetit!