



Embrace the Mess: Finding the Fun Factor with Food

Our little ones are constantly learning new skills, both when we are encouraging it and when we might not be thinking about it. The feeding process is no exception. Learning how to eat uses all the senses. Toy pots and pans, utensils, and toy foods can promote this development.

This play can also happen with food. Real food. Allowing them to learn about food textures, smells, and tastes through play can help them get more comfortable with the idea of eating it. This means food may end up everywhere but their stomach for a short time.

So, let's learn to embrace the mess and perhaps even encourage it! Whether your infant is being introduced to new foods with purees or soft foods, or your toddler is trying a new fruit, vegetable, protein, or grain, allow them to explore with all their senses. Here are some ways to get this process started:

- Infants can self-feed with their fingers or a spoon. Both promote feeding skills by self-directing their hands toward their mouth. It also helps encourage the chewing motion when the food reaches their gums. Consider a washable mat or a trash bag underneath their high chair to make cleanup a little easier.
- Rather than wiping infant's or toddler's faces after each bite, allow them to explore foods with all senses. This includes the feeling of food on their hands and face, the sight of foods on their plate and hands, and perhaps the taste and smell of foods mixed on their spoon, hands, and face. Bibs you can rinse in the sink make cleanup quick, easy, and ready for the next meal. Or, let them eat without a shirt at the kitchen table. Their bodies are easier to wash than a stained shirt!
- Tap into fun by giving foods fun names or thinking of ways to play with them. Put raspberries on the end of fingers and call them "finger hats" or encourage them to make a tower of carrot coins. Even if they don't end up eating these foods, they are being exposed to them in more ways than one.
- As kiddos get a little older, encourage them to be more involved in the entire process of a meal. Toddlers can help pick out new foods to try at the grocery store, help in the kitchen with some tasks, and learn about where foods come from in the garden!

Children learn using their sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch. Learning to eat and try new foods is no different. Allowing them to tap into these senses can support their growth and

development in the long run. So, embrace the mess and allow your little one to find the fun factor with food.

References

MD, F., & Potock, M. (2022). *Raising a Healthy, Happy Eater: A Parent's Handbook, Second Edition*. The Experiment.

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