

Food Play

What is food play?

Food play is a fun and stress-free way to help your child learn about food using their senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. It is common for children to play with food as they learn to eat.

Food play can help your child feel more comfortable around new foods. By exploring food with their senses, they build confidence without needing to taste or eat. Playing with food can make being near food feel fun and safe.

What do I need to know?

You don't need special food for food play. Choose food from home (including leftovers) for playtime, focusing on items you'd like your child to learn to eat.

Keep playtime separate from meals and away from the table. This helps your child relax and enjoy food without pressure to eat. Let your child lead. If they are not enjoying an activity, it is okay to stop or try something else.

Food on hands is part of the fun! Let your child decide to taste it or wipe it off with a cloth. There's no need to push or pressure them to eat.

Foods to avoid

For children under 4 years of age, some foods can cause choking and aren't safe. Avoid hard candies, gum, popcorn, marshmallows, whole nuts or seeds, fish with bones, and any snacks using toothpicks or skewers.

Ideas to help children with food play

Ask your child about their ideas for food play. Explore, be curious, and have fun. Remember these activities are meant to help your child enjoy being around food.

Play with coloured water. Mix flavoured drink crystals, or gelatin powder with water for water play. If your child gets water on their hands, they may taste it.

Make new shapes. Use cookie cutters to make different shapes with cheese slices, deli or roasted meats, bread, pancakes, play dough (recipe next page), or tortilla. Stack or sort the shapes or use them to make a picture.



Play a stacking game. Use cereal, small chunks of cheese, chocolate squares, or crackers to stack food to make towers— see how high they can go. Ask your child to count or sort foods by colours, shapes, and types.

Make faces, patterns, and pictures. Use vegetables and fruits, cheese puffs, pasta, nuts, dried beans, chocolate chips, or 'O' shaped cereal to make funny faces patterns, pictures, roads or lines.



Make a house. Use cookies or crackers for the base, nut butter, icing, or honey for glue, and square wheat cereal for the chimney, windows, or sidewalk.

Make jewellery, designs, or roadways from coloured noodles. Colour cooked noodles by adding food colour drops, pudding mix, or drink crystals.



Play counting games. Use crackers, cookies, fruit, or vegetables to see how many your child can hold in their cupped hands. This helps your child to touch food with their whole hand. Count, sort, or measure the food.



Play with cars, trucks, and blocks in 'mud.' Use ketchup, pudding, yogurt, or other liquid foods as 'mud' and run toys like cars, trucks, and blocks through the 'mud' to make tracks.

Pretend to fish. Make a 'sea' with a piece of paper. Put cereal, raisins, cake sprinkles, and other small foods on the paper. Tie a lollipop to a string and lick it to make it sticky, then 'fish' for the foods in the sea.

Look for buried treasure. Fill a bucket with uncooked beans, oatmeal, or pasta. Bury a few small toys inside, mix it up, and then find the toys. A harder option — add water to the mix and have your child find toys in the wet mixture. Use a spoon if needed.



Play with gelatin dessert crystals. Sprinkle flavoured gelatin dessert crystals on a piece of paper. Use fingertips to lick the crystals to discover the colour and flavour.

Paint with food. Using a wipeable surface like a tray, mirror, or place mat. Create pictures using the following foods. Your child may also use their fingers in the 'paint'.



Paint with:

Peanut butter
Pudding
Ketchup
Yogurt
Hummus

Brush with:

Bread sticks
Broccoli
Carrot sticks
Cheese strings
Licorice pieces

Stamp with:

Apple slices
Carrot shapes
Celery sticks
Potato pieces
Orange shapes

Face paint using yogurt or pudding. Paint your arms and face, then let your child do the same. Look in the mirror together so they can see their face. Make funny faces in the mirror.



Pretend to play music with food.

A carrot, celery, parsnip, or licorice stick can be a flute or recorder. A banana can act as a trumpet or microphone.

Have a tea party or picnic. Encourage your child to include their dolls, dinosaurs, or stuffed animals in food play at a tea party or picnic.

Make string art with food. Help your child rub a coloured, wet, sticky food like hummus, jelly, ketchup, nut butter, spaghetti sauce, yogurt, or chocolate pudding on a piece of string. Use the string to make patterns on a piece of paper.

Make play dough that you can eat. Mix in cocoa, cinnamon, vanilla, icing sugar, or flavouring like peppermint, coconut, or almond to give the dough a flavour and smell. Use the dough to cut out shapes and roll balls, or stick items in the dough that your child can pull out. Make your own recipe or use the one below.

Edible Play Dough Recipe

1 cup	baby cereal with iron	250 mL
1 cup	cornstarch	250 mL
½ cup	water, fruit juice, or applesauce	125 mL
3 Tbsp	vegetable oil	45 mL
½ tsp	flavouring like vanilla or peppermint	2 mL
Drops	food colour (optional)	

In a medium bowl, combine baby cereal and cornstarch. Stir well. Mix water and oil together. Add flavouring and/or food colour drops if using. Add water and oil to cereal mixture and stir until it forms a ball. Knead the dough in the bowl until it is smooth and easy to shape. If the dough is sticky, add a small amount of cereal and mix again. Repeat this step as needed. If the dough dries and cracks, wet your hands and knead the dough. Unused dough can be stored in the fridge for 24 hours. Throw dough in the compost after playing.