Food and Toddlers: Enhancing Fine Motor Skills Using Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Lesson Overview

Lesson Participants: CACFP personnel and school-age child care staff

Type of Lesson: Short face-to-face training session

Time Needed to Conduct the Lesson: 15 minutes

Lesson Description: This lesson explains the relationship toddlers have with food and the ways food can be used to enhance fine motor skill development.

Lesson Objectives
At the completion of the lesson the participant will be able to use food activities to assist in the development of fine motor skills.

Get Ready to Train

The format for the CARE Connection lesson plans includes an overview, preparation checklist, lesson-at-a-glance with timeline for conducting the lesson, script, and lists of references and other resources. The instructor will use the script to present the lesson to the participants. Each script gives directions to the instructor—DO, SAY, ASK—to deliver the lesson.

The lesson can be presented in the child care center or family day care home, media center, or classroom.
## Preparation Checklist

**Directions:** Use the Preparation Checklist to get ready for the training session. Keep track of your progress by checking off tasks as they are completed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Done</th>
<th>Lesson Tasks</th>
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### Gather Materials

**Materials Needed:**

- [ ] Instructor’s Script
- [ ] Handout 1: *Toddlers and Food*
- [ ] Handout 2: *Skill Development and Enhancement Activities*
- [ ] Pens or pencils (one for each participant)
- [ ] Session Evaluation/Feedback Form (one for each participant)

### Prepare for Lesson

**Before the Training:**

- [ ] Make copies of Handouts 1 and 2 (one of each for each participant).
- [ ] Make copies of Session Evaluation/Feedback Form (one for each participant). You may use the sample NFSMI evaluation form or develop your own.

**On Training Day:**

- [ ] Place pens or pencils on tables (one for each participant).
- [ ] Distribute Handouts 1 and 2 to each participant at appropriate time.

**On the Instructor’s Table:**

- [ ] Instructor’s Script
- [ ] Instructor’s copies of Handouts 1 and 2
- [ ] Session Evaluation/Feedback Forms
Lesson at a Glance  
(15 minutes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Materials</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>Introduction and Overview</td>
<td>Introduce topic</td>
<td>• Instructor’s Script</td>
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</table>
| 11 minutes | Objective: Plan food activities that assist in the development of fine motor skills. | Participant review and discussion | • Handout 1: Toddlers and Food  
• Handout 2: Skill Development and Enhancement Activities |
| 1 minute | Summary and Close                          | Review Key Points                   | Script                                                      |
| 2 minutes | Session evaluation/feedback                | Conduct a short evaluation of the lesson. | • Sample evaluation/feedback form or standard form used in your nutrition program |

References


Internet Resources

Instructor’s Script

SAY:
Think of a challenging meal experience you may have had while feeding toddlers. What went wrong?

DO:
Allow one or two volunteers to share his/her experience.

SAY:
During the toddler years, children begin to recognize their food likes and dislikes. Also during this age, some toddlers begin to experience picky eating. Picky eating is when children have selective food preferences. Some adults may grow concerned that children may not receive the adequate nutrition needed to grow properly. Fortunately, there are some positive factors to remember during mealtime.

DO:
Distribute Handout 1: Toddlers and Food

SAY:
Take a moment to look at “Things to Remember Regarding Toddlers and Food” on Handout 1.

ASK:
In groups of two or three, review the handout. Choose the top three things you should know or do when working with toddlers during mealtimes and why they are important.

DO:
Give participants a few minutes to respond.

SAY:
While healthy eating habits are essential for toddlers, we also know that the development of fine motor skills is also important.
Fine motor skills involve small muscle movements in the hands and fingers. The movements are often in coordination with eye movements. These movements enable functions such as writing, grasping small objects, and fastening clothing.

Distribute copies of Handout 2: *Skill Development and Enhancement Activities*

Since the fine motor skills developed during the toddler years are essential in the development of other skills such as writing and fastening clothing, it is important to provide a variety of opportunities to practice these skills.

Look at the activities on Handout 2.

Have you completed any of the activities to enhance fine motor skills?

Allow and discuss responses from volunteers.

Do you have any other developmentally appropriate food-related activities that have been successful in enhancing fine motor skill development that you would like to share?

Select two volunteers to answer.

Share with the group one new developmentally appropriate food activity you will use to improve fine motor skills.

Select two volunteers to answer.
Review Key Points to Close Lesson

**SAY:**
We see that, with proper planning, we can provide developmentally appropriate food-related activities that will assist toddlers in eating nutritious foods and that enhance fine motor skill development. It’s important to offer a variety of foods to select from and not to focus on the foods the child likes or dislikes. Keep your handouts as a reference to refer to when planning food activities for toddlers.

**DO:**
Distribute the session evaluation/feedback form.

**SAY:**
Thank you for participating in the lesson today. Please take a couple of minutes to complete the session evaluation/feedback form. Thank you for your input.
Things to remember regarding toddlers and food:

- Toddlers have short attention spans. Design mealtimes to fit their needs.

- As toddlers’ moods change, so will their eating habits. This could include wanting to eat only one specific food all day (examples: saltine crackers, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches) and then refusing to eat that same food the next day. This is known as a food jag.

- Toddlers are beginning to establish food preferences.

- Food choice and meal times present opportunities for power struggles.

- Toddlers’ rate of growth has slowed down so they need less food than as infants.

- Toddlers will generally quit eating when they are full. Do not force them to eat.

- Introduce one new food at a time. Offering too many new items at once may cause children to become confused and overwhelmed with new flavors.

- Toddlers will try new foods if offered in a pleasant and appealing manner.

- Provide a variety of colorful foods.

- Toddlers may need to be offered a new food item 6-12 times before they are willing to try it or acquire a taste for it.

- Avoid serving casseroles. The many food items in casseroles make it difficult to determine if there is an allergy to one particular food item.
Skill Development and Enhancement Activities
Handout 2

What are fine motor skills?

Fine motor skills involve small muscle movements which occur with the hand, usually in coordination with the eyes. This enables functions such as writing, grasping small objects, and fastening clothing.

Since toddlers are becoming more self-sufficient and like doing things by themselves, provide many opportunities to develop new skills. Encourage independence during mealtimes including finger-feeding, using utensils, and drinking from a cup with minimum assistance. At this age, children can assist in simple food preparation and serving. Be sure to use utensils that are appropriate for their small hands.

Simple tasks and activities should be challenging, but developmentally appropriate. Supply encouragement, support, and time to develop new skills.

The following developmentally appropriate activities enhance fine motor skill development. Some of the activities also suggest ways to introduce food toddlers may otherwise be reluctant to eat.

Child-directed activities:
1. **Taste-Testing**: During lunch and/or snack time, in addition to Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) requirements, place an assortment of healthy, colorful vegetables such as sliced tomatoes, sliced cucumbers, broccoli florets, cauliflower florets, and red pepper strips on the table. Allow children to freely manipulate and taste the vegetables at will. The next time, replace the vegetables with healthy fruits or breads, etc. Be sure to avoid foods and food sizes that may pose a choking hazard.
2. **Let Them Play**: Include various play food items and eating utensils as part of the inventory of toys toddlers can choose from.
Large group activities:

1. Dip It: Toddlers like to dip foods. Allowing toddlers to dip their fruits and vegetables enhances fine motor development (grasping food between the fingers and maintaining control while guiding in and out of dip). Consider using a healthy dip as part of your CACFP meal or snack.

   Suggestions for healthy dips
   - cottage cheese or tofu dip
   - guacamole
   - blueberry yogurt dip
   - pureed fruits or vegetables
   - yogurt, plain or sweetened with juice concentrate
   - hummus

2. Spread It: The dips listed above serve equally well as spreads on apple or pear slices, bell-pepper strips, rice cakes, bagels, and toast. Allowing toddlers to use a spoon or butter knife involves grasping the utensil while maintaining control of the food while spreading, which enhances fine motor skill development.

3. Plant a Garden Together: Children are usually more interested in eating what they have helped to grow. Let them help care for the plants, pick the ripe vegetables, and wash and prepare them. If outdoor space is not available, you can plant seeds in flower pots or other containers. All of these activities use small muscles of the body.

4. Let Them Cook It: Children are more likely to eat their own creations, so when appropriate, let them help prepare the food. Assist toddlers in using cookie cutters to create edible designs out of foods like cheese, bread, thin meat slices, or cooked lasagna noodles.

5. Make Veggie Art: Help toddlers create colorful faces with olive-slice eyes, tomato ears, mushroom noses, bell-pepper mustaches, and any other playful features they can think of. Example: zucchini pancakes with pea eyes, a carrot nose, and cheese hair.

6. Top It: Offer healthy toppings such as yogurt, hummus, guacamole, tomato sauce, and applesauce. Assist toddlers in applying and sampling these toppings on their food. Putting nutritious, familiar favorites on top of new and less-desirable foods is a good way to broaden the finicky toddler's menu.
Small group activities:
1. **Make Smoothies:** Milk and fruit(s) or vegetable(s), along with supplements such as juice, wheat germ, yogurt, and honey can be the basis of very healthy meals. Let children place the foods and liquids in the blender (with adult assistance).
2. **Cut It Up:** How much a child will eat often depends on how it is cut. Assist toddlers in cutting sandwiches, pancakes, waffles, and pizza into various shapes using cookie cutters or a plastic knife.
3. **Use Utensils:** For older toddlers, demonstrate proper use of eating utensils. Examples include spearing food with a fork, using a knife and fork to cut food into bite-size pieces and twirling spaghetti on a fork. Some children may not master the use of utensils until the age of four.
4. **Roll the Dough:** Give toddlers balls of bread dough and small rolling pins. Demonstrate how to roll the dough out. Add cookie cutters for cutting out different shapes. Bake for added fun.

Safety Tips:
Before introducing any new foods, always check for food allergies, especially nuts.

Remember to avoid foods or food shapes that can be a choking hazard. Foods that are round, hard, small, thick and sticky, smooth, or slippery pose the greatest risk.

Foods that may be a risk for choking:
- Hot dogs (whole or sliced into rounds)
- Raw carrot rounds
- Whole grapes
- Hard candy
- Nuts and seeds
- Raw peas
- Hard pretzels
- Chips
- Peanuts
- Popcorn
- Marshmallows
- Spoonfuls of peanut butter