

Thanksgiving – how to PLAY our way into new experiences



Play is how children learn to explore, solve, and model what they see happening around them daily. Playing in the kitchen can be done using items from your pantry, food, and grocery bags. Using what you have at home is the easiest way to play.

How to build on experiences with your child:

Exposing our children to new experiences, traditions, or even people takes time, patience (on our part), and time to play and get comfortable with new ideas.

- You can set up a play kitchen with different foods to ‘cook’ and eat together, labeling what the foods are.
- We can invite our children into the kitchen (or table/highchair) to help us with a cooking/prep task. Buttering bread, rolling pin to roll out a crust, and playing in whip cream for a sensory activity.
- Play a sensory game of smelling and tasting new foods. We can be silly when we take a big ‘sniff’ of pumpkin spice, and we can lick a piece of toast with butter, cinnamon, and sugar.
- Our toddlers know they are not babies anymore. They want to do ‘big kid’ stuff now. Giving them ‘jobs’ when we go grocery shopping – helping to put produce in a plastic bag, choosing a snack to try, showing them the products in the meat section, letting them pick up a box of crackers and put them in the cart or let them hold them in the seat with them.

Why do we need to invest this time to practice?

As our children grow, they learn how the world around them works. Our daily routines become familiar, and we begin decorating for the seasons and holidays at the end of September. Our homes have changed, the stores have changed and even being able to play outside is not the same. Everything has changed in our child’s world, and they are trying to understand why.

- What can I touch?
- Why does that ‘thing’ make sounds when I walk by it (random holiday decorations in the store or our homes)?
- Why am I wearing more clothes/shoes/jackets?

We might be excited about different activities, traditions, decorating or celebrating, but our littles are now just becoming aware of all the sights, sounds, and smells. As parents, we may forget how NEW all of this is to our toddlers in our excitement about what they will experience.

Where can we begin:

Dramatic Play:

When we set up a pretend play kitchen in our classrooms, we have many real-life items that would be familiar to the children. We also have plastic fruits, vegetables, and egg containers (we will add the plastic eggs used around Easter time). Plastic cups, plates, silverware, napkins, little pots, spatulas, etc.

Each child is at their own stage of play, and our goal is to meet them right where they are. Watching them see what they are drawn to and then playing right there—putting eggs into the carton, following their lead, mimicking their actions and sounds, and following their directions.

1. **Materials Needed:** Play food – plastic, wood, items from your pantry, recycled empty boxes, items to set the table, pretend to eat with - whatever you have in your home. You can set it up on a coffee table, around a play kitchen if you have one, or near some shelves where your child can grab the items they want to play with.
2. **How to:** This activity can be done whenever you have time to set up something you can keep out for a week to allow for growth on the play or something you set up for a day and put away to do again at a different time.
3. **Developmentally, this activity encourages:** This type of play reinforces many skills. You are making a regular real-life activity accessible to your child. They know this – they’ve watched you make food, they’ve watched you cook, they have held the fruit snacks. They are being able to support them as they add items to their plates, pots, and bowls. Language is a big one – labeling, naming, and being able to choose what they want to play with that is usually in the ‘kitchen.’ Eye-hand coordination as they pick items, put them in a bag or basket, do heavy work lifting and carrying items, open up lids, and stack items on shelves. Again, we want to use 1–2-word phrases to help keep the communication clear and straightforward ‘Yum, cereal,’ “red apples,” ‘heavy can’ and ‘lift – so heavy.’ If you have siblings, this is a great group play activity. Each child will be at their level of play, and having models of those levels of play is a natural way to help them grow in all areas.

Let’s TASTE, TOUCH, and engage with food:

1. **Materials Needed:** Foods to explore and engage with. You can start easy by giving your child toast, a plastic knife or spoon, and some jam. Graham crackers to dip into yogurt or pudding. Cheese slices and crackers. Fruit with yogurt, maybe a few chocolate chips. Let them spread, dip, rip, bite, poke, lick, and eat. The focus here is to explore – touch, lick, smell, and see it. Also, have a **NO THANK YOU** Bowl handy, so your child can put the item into the bowl when they do not want to engage with it.
2. **How to:** This activity can be done whenever you have time to set it up. It could be before a meal or as a snack opportunity. Less is usually more – figure out what you have on hand, how you want to explore it and set it up. Age and skill levels need to be considered. Yogurt can be put into smaller bowls to dip seasonal fruits or even a favorite fruit. The focus here is to have fun, no pressure, and to PLAY as you explore and try new tastes and textures.
3. **Developmentally, this activity encourages:** If your child is not into touching new items, have a fork, a child’s chopstick, or even a straw that they can use to poke or hold the food with. Use simple language – poke, lick, in/out, off/on, scoop, bite. Be silly! This is a time to have fun and enjoy each other. If your child doesn’t like something, have them put it in the NO THANK YOU bowl – they still have to touch it to

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make it go away. No big deal – we can try that food on another occasion. If they find something they like – cheer that on! Make a big deal that they tried something, share with them and enjoy this moment.

- 4. Meals can be stressful:** Mealtime, snacks, and food can be a tricky balance. You may have a child who only eats from a limited diet. You don't want them to be hungry. Still, you also know that a growing body needs to have a variety of foods for a healthy diet that contains vitamins and minerals to help with a regular schedule of bowel movements to avoid constipation.

Add a holiday meal with traditional foods, and the pressure to have your child participate can feel overwhelming. You are not alone. Whip cream makes everything better – start there with the can. Be silly, introduce pie crust, and dip it in the whipped cream! Who says we can't have pumpkin pie for breakfast – it is a fruit, and pumpkins have seeds! You know your child best – take some of these ideas and try them. If they don't work – it is OK. Try something else. We want our children to engage with the food. That is all. It takes time, practice, patience, and giving yourself grace. YOU CAN DO THIS!



Lesson Plan submitted by: AnnMarie Adams

Links below for more ideas.

Photo credit: AnnMarie Adams, daughter between 14-20 months old (2010)

[Fall Themed Dramatic Play Center for Preschool and Kindergarten \(dream big-littleone.com\)](https://www.dreambig-littleone.com/fall-themed-dramatic-play-center-for-preschool-and-kindergarten)

[5 ways to play with food! - YouTube](#)

[5 ways to play with food - Round 2! - YouTube](#)

[Play with Me OT - YouTube](#)

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