

Introducing Food Preparation: The Savory Side of Practical Life

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The Montessori early childhood environment magnetically draws young children to the area known as Practical Life, but nothing makes this child-sized wonderland come alive more than the introduction of food preparation activities.

Food preparation is the logical culmination of the Practical Life curriculum, activities the child sees in the home and in everyday life. Through movement such as slicing and chopping, stirring and mixing, peeling and juicing real foods, the hand begins the work of concentrating. What follows is coordination, order, independence, and confidence.

Montessori teachers have been taught that Practical Life is the key to unlocking our curriculum areas. The importance of a well rounded, fully developed Practical Life area—one that includes food preparation—cannot be underestimated or denied. The ingeniousness of food preparation activities is that they are the absolute integration of all of the curriculum areas. As in “real life,” food can serve many purposes and provide a sensory experience where spontaneous discovery and lifelong learning can take place. Food preparation activities often lead the child to success in academic areas.

As teachers, what can we do to maintain and challenge the inquisitive child’s interest in food preparation?

First, we must make sure children master the basic activities in each of the 4 areas of Practical Life: Movement, Care of the Person, Care of the Environment, and Grace and Courtesy. Food preparation activities integrate skills from these four groups into a highly popular and much needed skill for life.

We must pay attention to the individual materials. To promote independence, all necessary items must be present to complete the activity. The work should be placed on a tray that is easy for the child to carry, use, and clean. The materials must be real and provide purposeful work for the child. Clean, simple lines and the natural beauty of the selected materials will make the activity attractive and inviting.

Let’s use the example of picking grapes or making lemonade. In undertaking these tasks, the child learns, practices, and refines movement skills. Large-muscle control is needed to carry the activity to and from the shelf and to use a chair. Small muscle control is needed to perform the specific skill or skills to complete the exercise successfully, such as hand transfer or pouring. The beautiful presentation of the food on the serving tray further develops fine-motor physical skills and helps build visual awareness.

Further refining Care of the Person skills, the child engaged in food preparation learns to wash her hands before and after the activity and to practice proper use of a napkin: first on the lap, then to wipe her mouth.

As an extension of the Care of the Environment activities, children learn to take dirty dishes to the dishwashing area to be washed, dried, and put away. Each child sponges clean his work area. A broom or wet mop I used for any floor clean up.

In addition, food preparation goes a long way toward helping the child practice Grace and Courtesy Skills. She may take measured bites or drinks of the food prepared. She remains seated while eating or drinking. She does not talk with food in her mouth. She may prepare and offer food to others.