

A FROEBELIAN APPROACH



cooking with young children

by Anna Denton and Lucy Parker



This pamphlet has been produced by the Froebel Trust as part of a series focussing on various themes closely associated with Froebelian practice today. The pamphlets are an accessible resource for those supporting children birth to eight.

Introduction

'Cooking is one of Froebel's Occupations which relates to real life, involves the child in real and practical work, encourages motivation, develops independence and promotes cross-curricular learning' (McCormick 2012: 145)



Fig.1: Children are highly engaged as they help an adult to weigh out the ingredients for bread. Each child is watching carefully as the adult pours the flour, ready to say "stop" when the scales reach the correct amount.

Cooking with young children

Froebel's Occupations are educational activities which enable the child to be creative, to communicate, develop physical and problem-solving skills, and develop an understanding of the natural world. They are enjoyable for children at the same time as equipping them to understand the world of work and develop skills which bring satisfaction and commitment. In an early years setting today, Froebelian Occupations would be activities such as sewing, clay, woodwork and cooking.

In this pamphlet we are going to introduce you to developing cookery in your setting through Froebelian principles. Cookery provides an exciting learning opportunity for all children. It allows children and adults to work together with the adult guiding the child but giving the child freedom to make decisions and undertake important tasks such as chopping vegetables. Through finding out where food comes from and how it grows, the child is connected to nature and has a greater understanding of the world around them. Cooking plays an important role in supporting teaching and learning (McCormick 2012) and supports all areas of the curriculum.



Fig. 2: Children learn skills through first-hand experiences. Here is a child kneading the dough to make bread. An adult has modelled the technique and the child confidently follows by pulling and stretching the dough. Practising this skill enables children to strengthen the muscles in their hands and arms, which impacts on other areas of the curriculum such as mark making and writing.

Cooking as a first-hand experience

Cooking is an active and engaging first-hand experience for all children. In a Froebelian setting, cooking is a core part of the curriculum and children have regular opportunities to cook. Cooking can happen in different ways. When cooking as a planned group activity, small groups (a maximum of 10) ensure it is a valuable experience and that children are well supported. Cooking can also happen more spontaneously, for example during child-initiated play time, or as children become more skilled they can cook independently or in small groups.

In whatever context cooking happens, when preparing for cooking the area should be well organised and look inviting. Each child should have their own bowl, tools and apron. This enables the children to fully engage with the process and have their own space for cooking. A simple recipe card can be clearly displayed so that children of all abilities can see what they are going to be cooking. Having pictures alongside written instructions promotes independence as children can easily read the recipe by recognising ingredients and counting simple measurements. Recipes can be easily adapted and simplified to use spoons or cups as a measure.

'The importance of direct experience and the way it makes possible the development of real learning cannot be over-emphasized' (Bruce 2004: 126)



Fig. 3: After an adult has modelled how to crack an egg, this child has a go by herself. Cracking eggs independently is always an exciting experience!

Risks and benefits

For some practitioners, the thought of young children using sharp utensils is a concern. Supporting practitioners to think about the benefits of risk is important. Tovey suggests that 'the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits' (Tovey 2017: 71).

Using real tools is a very important part of the cooking process. Sharp knives, graters and peelers are all safe with the right supervision and the experience supports children as they learn to assess risk and stay safe. Children as young as two use real knives and graters in our nursery and become confident and safe cooks. It's important that the child 'learns how to assess possible danger, to manage risk and take responsibility for [their] own actions' (Tovey 2017: 41).

Froebel believed that children should embrace challenges, developing their capacities through step-by-step stages, rather than being encouraged to evade them. Through taking on challenges and risk they will be more confident in the world (Froebel in Lilley 1967).

Trusting children with real tools involves them wholeheartedly in the process of cooking and this is also important for other aspects of the experience. Allowing children to have their own equipment and space to cook gives them responsibility and teaches children to respect their learning environment. This can extend to the end of cooking, where children clean their cooking space, thus taking part in the whole cooking process from start to finish.



Fig. 4: Children learn to take risks through using real tools with a purpose. Here a child uses a grater independently. An adult carefully supervises and offers support if necessary.



Fig. 5: Cutting fruit and vegetables with a sharp knife is much safer than using a blunt knife. The skill is modelled by an adult and children are closely supported to ensure they are being safe and responsible at all times.

**'It's important that the child 'learns how to assess possible danger, to manage risk and take responsibility for [their] own actions'
(Tovey 2017: 41)**

Connecting with nature

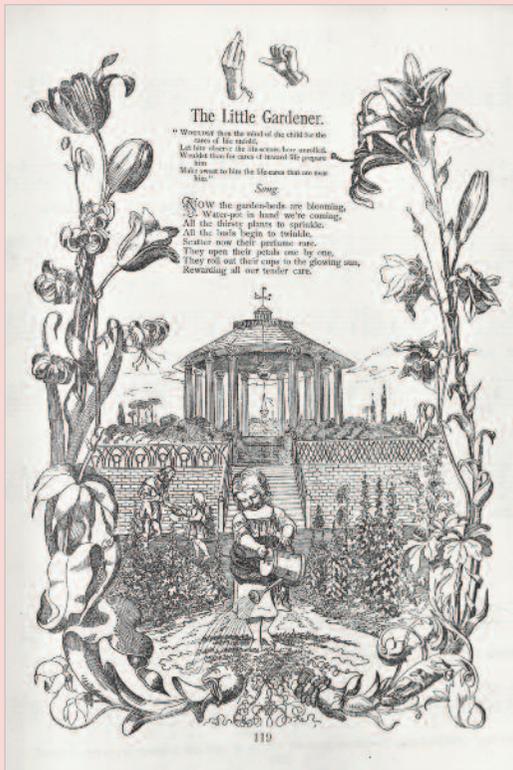


Fig. 6: 'The Little Gardener' from Froebel's *Mother-Play and Nursery-Songs*

Froebel believed it was essential for children to have direct experience of nature and learning *in* nature rather than just *about* nature (Tovey 2017). Cooking with children provides many opportunities to make connections with the natural world and to learn about nature. Even with limited space, planting and growing is possible: a herb garden can be added to an outside area or a window ledge inside; or vegetables can be grown in a small container. Children can immerse themselves in the experience as they plant seeds, care for them, watch them grow and use the produce in their own recipes.

Connecting with nature in a practical way teaches children about the seasons and caring for living things. They relish the responsibility and it can be a very rewarding experience.

'The child who has cared
for another living thing....
is more easily led to care
for [their] own life'
(Froebel in Lilley 1967: 128)

Children explore the ingredients they are using and build an understanding of where they come from. It is important to introduce ingredients in their raw state, so children see a whole carrot, for example, and understand how by using tools such as a peeler or a grater, the carrot changes form and can be used within a recipe.



Fig. 7: It is a very rewarding experience for children to grow and care for their own ingredients. Here children have grown courgettes in a small recycled sink in the nursery garden. They harvested the courgettes when they were ready and made vegetable muffins.

Community links

Froebel believed that children should feel a sense of connection between home and school and that educators should work in close partnership with parents. Cookery presents many opportunities to connect with the family and the wider community. Festivals and special occasions provide a time to prepare and share food together and learn about different cultures. These occasions provide a chance to introduce children to new tastes and foods they may not have experienced before. Inviting parents, grand-parents and carers to come in and share special recipes and cook with the children is a wonderful way to involve children in cultural traditions. As Chris McCormick stresses 'food preparation crosses all cultures and carries the potential for uniting families, friends, strangers and cultures in promotion of shared learning at the deepest level' (2012:153).

Whilst these opportunities may arise through special occasions, it is important to promote those community links within everyday cooking activities. This could be through sharing food within the setting with friends and key practitioners, sitting down with an adult at the snack table or children taking food home to share with their families. We often send our recipe cards and books home with the children, so they share their cooking experiences with their families. Parents then often share home cooking photographs with us and it's wonderful seeing children teaching their parents and siblings the cookery skills they have learned at nursery.

'Educators should find the common threads that bind a community together, the unity in diversity'
(Tovey 2017: 121)



Fig. 8: Inviting parents to cook with their children creates a sense of connection between home and school. Children often express great pride in showing their parents how they learn to cook at school. Hugely valuable links can be made as families can share favourite recipes or a cultural dish.





Fig. 9: A parent and child follow a recipe together during a family stay and play session to make cakes.



Fig.10: An International Day feast invites families to share dishes from different cultures. Families generously take part and bring in different dishes from around the world.

Cooking and nurture

A Froebelian approach is respectful of the child and promotes warm, trusting relationships and cooking is a powerful way to enable this. Cooking can be a calm and nurturing time for children. Following a recipe sets an expectation and gives a clear target for everyone to work towards. A child develops resilience as they learn how to master skills effectively. Being in a small group supports quality interactions and conversations as children share time together. High levels of involvement and wellbeing can be seen as children develop their skills and spend time cooking with each other.

'Froebel believed that each individual child is unique but gains in significance as part of a whole supportive and loving community'
(Tovey 2017: 44)

By giving responsibility and showing respect, a child's confidence and self-esteem can be nurtured. The real-life experience of cooking with children naturally promotes high expectations but provides easy opportunities to build trust. During a cooking experience a child is motivated to make and share. It is rewarding for a child to be trusted with ingredients and tools and creating something to eat. There is pride in the result of following a recipe, mastering a new skill and making something to share and eat with somebody. Often at nursery we cook for children to take home to eat with their family but also enough to taste and share with their peers at snack time. The social aspect of sharing food together helps to support positive relationships.



Fig. 11: A shared experience - two children from the nurture group work together to make a cake. Working collaboratively supports communication and emotional development. They later share the finished cake with the rest of their group which continues to strengthen positive relationships and interactions.

Cooking, play and the curriculum



Fig. 12: This is an example of a recipe adapted to be measured in spoonfuls which allows the children to cook without lots of equipment, be independent and use their mathematical and literacy skills as they follow each step.

Froebel emphasised the need for an integrated curriculum where all areas of learning come together in a meaningful whole (Tovey 2017). Cooking achieves this by covering all areas of the curriculum, from reading recipes, to counting, measuring and estimating ingredients, manipulating and using tools and utensils, exploring texture, shape and form, finding out about where food comes from, learning about changes of state and providing endless opportunities for conversation and developing language and communication (McCormick 2012). It also requires children to 'have a go' and try new things, be confident, independent and motivated.

'Many aspects of Froebelian theory can be closely linked with the practice of cooking, giving it an important role to play in supporting learning and teaching'
(McCormick 2012: 153)

Having rich first-hand experiences impacts positively on children's play and Froebel firmly believed that children draw upon these real opportunities in their play (Tovey 2017). As Jane Khan states, when children 'have experiences on which to draw they can play much better at setting up a Chinese take-away or holding a tea party' (2003: 14). Providing numerous opportunities in your setting where children can engage in imaginative play is important. We often observe children making 'chocolate cake' at the clay table, 'soup' in the mud kitchen or 'dinner' in the home corner.

Cooking also links to stories and rhymes. Through his *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs*, Froebel suggested finger rhymes and games for mothers to share at home with their children (Froebel 1878). Many of the songs highlighted every-day life and helped to make connections with the child's experience and the wider world (Tovey 2017). For example in the song 'Pat-a-Cake', the illustrations show the process of the corn growing, being turned into flour and then the flour used to make the cake. Finding stories and rhymes for children to enjoy, which make connections with their cookery experience, supports their learning, play and understanding of the world.

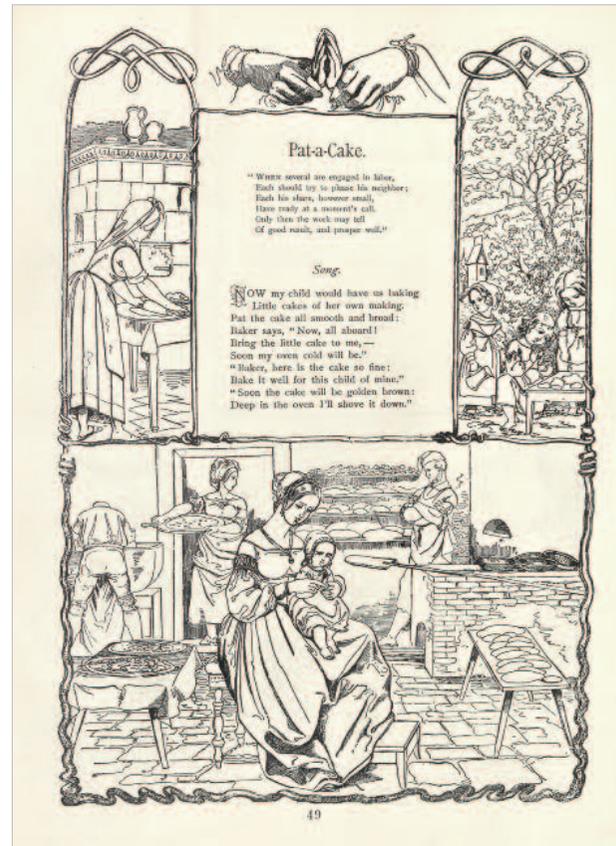


Fig. 13: 'Pat-a-Cake' from Froebel's *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs*



Fig. 14: A 'soup pie' inspired by a cookery session making vegetable soup.



Fig.15: These 3 photos illustrate how the children's learning interconnects using a story and cooking as a catalyst for that learning.

Below is an example of how a story and cooking helps to connect children's learning experiences:



A group of children have been enjoying the story of the gingerbread man. Their key practitioner shares the story with them and this leads onto learning the story together and acting out the story using props. The children cook gingerbread men, following a recipe. They make ginger play dough and re-create their cooking at the play dough area.



Their interest continues, and they make gingerbread man puppets. They talk about the story and wonder what happens to the gingerbread man when he goes into the river with the fox. They conduct a science experiment and put one of the gingerbread men they have baked into some water to find out what happens!

Final thoughts

Top tips for cooking

Cooking is an incredibly rewarding experience and establishing it in your setting provides unique learning experiences for the children and staff. Embedding it as part of your core provision does not happen instantly. It is important to work together as a team, share ideas and concerns, be willing to 'have a go' and keep your children's interests and needs at the centre of what you do. Here are some 'top tips' to help you:

- Set up the space to cook in an organised and inviting way. Each child should have a bowl and a work space. A recipe can be displayed clearly for children to see, involving them in what they will be making. It is important to have tools and ingredients ready. This ensures the adult can support the children through the cooking process in a meaningful way.
- Cooking with a small group of children makes the experience valuable and engaging. Adults have time to interact and support children effectively. Time can be taken to discuss the recipe and explore the ingredients, making cookery a rich learning experience.
- Keep recipes simple so children can master basic skills such as mixing, peeling, grating and chopping. Recipes can be adapted so children can measure in spoonfuls, which increases independence, counting and reading skills.
- Allow plenty of time for cooking so the experience is not rushed. Children can take their time to follow the steps in a recipe, but also appreciate the textures and changes that occur as they cook.
- Include children in all elements of the cooking experience and give them ownership over what they cook. They should have the opportunity to

Fig. 16: Showing off a gingerbread teddy bear with pride! Children are always highly engaged during a cooking session and show great pride in their achievements.



safely observe the food going into the oven to be cooked, but also tidy away after themselves. Children can help with sweeping, washing up and putting equipment away.

- Consider how cooking links to the rest of the curriculum. Observe children as they play and be ready to offer them opportunities to make meaningful connections with their cookery experience, for example, representing their cooking in the home corner or at the play dough area.

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Photo credits

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The authors

Anna Denton and Lucy Parker are both teachers and work together at Ludwick Nursery School in Hertfordshire. They joined the school at the same time and together have introduced cookery into the curriculum.



Clarence Lodge, Clarence Lane, Roehampton, London SW15 5JW
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www.froebeltrust.org.uk