



A Froebelian approach

Cooking with young children

by Anna Denton and Dr Lucy Parker



Contents



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Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood.

Froebel's ideas were considered revolutionary in the 1850s. The principles of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern mainstream early years educational practice.

Unity and connectedness

Everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk



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, p.145

Cooking is one of Froebel’s ‘Occupations’ within his sequence of Gifts and Occupations. The Occupations were workshop experiences that enabled children to be creative, to communicate, engage in real life activities and gain a greater understanding of the world around them.

Many of the experiences that children still engage with today have links to Froebel’s Occupations such as weaving and sewing, woodwork, clay, paper cutting and paper folding. Froebel saw his Gifts and Occupations as interconnecting parts of a whole approach that provided children with a wide range of creative, symbolic and exploratory opportunities.



Figs. 1 and 2: Children engage in the first-hand experience of cooking

Froebel (1782-1852) placed great emphasis on learning through first-hand experiences. This pamphlet will share how cooking can be introduced and developed in an early years setting, highlighting the benefits of this active and engaging activity when adopting a Froebelian perspective, and make connections with key Froebelian principles.

“The importance of direct experience and the way it makes possible the development of real learning cannot be over-emphasized.”

Bruce 2004, p.126

Froebelian principles in cooking

Relationships matter

Cooking and sharing food are social experiences that foster warm, trusting relationships.

Knowledgeable, nurturing educators

Educators can develop and share their own cooking skills within their setting. Through carefully observing children they can support them with cooking experiences that are in tune with the children's needs and interests.

Autonomous learners

Cooking provides many skills for children to learn and, through guidance from adults, children can become confident and independent cooks.

Unity and connectedness

Cooking and sharing food together strengthen our connections to each other and celebrate cultural similarities and differences. Involving children in the whole process of cooking from preparation to cooking, tidying away and eating, enables them to see the interconnecting parts.

The value of childhood in its own right

Cooking, eating and sharing food are lifelong. Cooking in childhood makes a significant and important contribution to early learning.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Children can plan and create their own recipes and make their own recipe cards or books.

The central importance of play

Real life experiences such as cooking, support children in their play and they will draw upon these direct experiences as they play in an imaginative or symbolic way.

Engaging with nature

Growing food from seed to harvest shows how we are connected to nature and the world around us.

Preparing to cook

In a Froebelian setting, cooking is a core part of the curriculum and children and adults have regular opportunities to cook and share food together. Children will arrive in their early years setting with many different experiences of food and cooking. So, responding to the needs and interests of the children is important, as well as thinking about how to introduce and include children in cooking experiences.

Babies and young children can be involved in cooking experiences. At this stage they are naturally curious about food and experiencing new tastes, smells and textures. For very young children this might be as simple as having a go at mixing or squashing and kneading some dough.



Fig. 3: Rolling dough - babies and young children can be involved in cooking experiences



Fig. 4: Having a well-organised cooking area enables children to work together and also develops their independence



Fig. 5: Having their own bowl and sourcing their own ingredients makes it an active and engaging experience

Cooking can happen in different ways. However, small groups ensure it is a valuable experience and that children are well supported. Cooking can happen as a planned activity or more spontaneously, for example during child-initiated play time. As children become more skilled, they can cook independently or in small peer 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, utensils and apron. A simple recipe card or sequence book can be clearly displayed so that children of all abilities can see what they are going to be cooking. Children can be involved in making these and sharing these with peers can prompt others to 'have a go' too.

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. Visual cards and Makaton signs are also a positive way of supporting children to follow instructions and recipes.

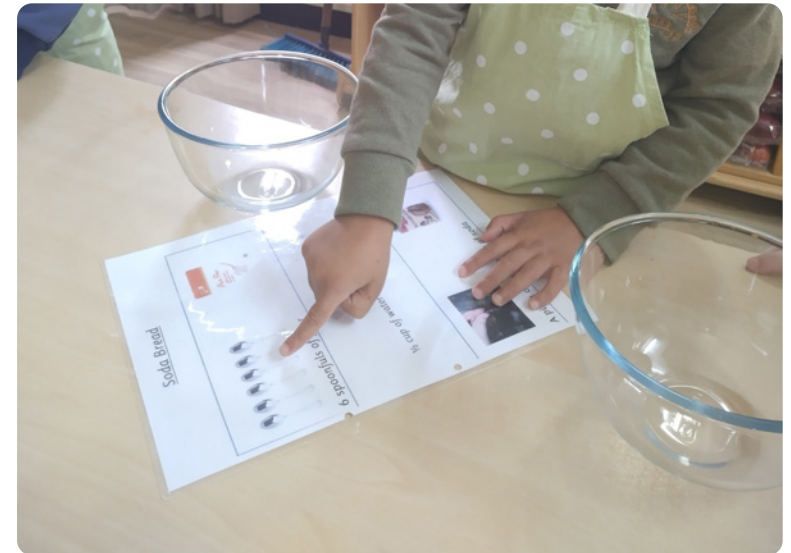


Fig. 6: Measuring ingredients using spoonfuls or cups allows children to easily follow a recipe

The value of risk and challenge

Using real tools is a very important part of the cooking process. Sharp knives, graters and peelers are all safe with the right guidance, which supports children as they learn to assess risk and become autonomous 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, p.41). Froebel believed that children should embrace challenges rather than be encouraged to evade them. Through taking on challenges and risk they will be more confident in the world (Froebel in Lilley 1967).

Supporting educators to think about the benefits of risk is valuable. Tovey suggests that 'the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits' (Tovey 2017, p.71). Having risk assessment measures in place and tools and equipment carefully and safely organised, will help educators to guide and support children with confidence.

Involving children in the whole process of cooking from finding utensils, preparation of ingredients through to tidying away provides children with a wide range of experiences and helps them develop many skills. Seeing the different parts of cooking as interconnecting supports Froebel's ideas of Unity and Connectedness, which makes experiences more meaningful to the child.



Fig. 7: Cracking an egg is always an exciting experience! Once the technique has been modelled, children can learn quickly how to do this independently



Fig. 8: Cutting vegetables with a sharp knife is safer than using a blunt knife. Children can be closely supported as they gain confidence in using a range of utensils

Connecting with nature

Cooking with children provides many opportunities to make connections with the natural world and to learn about nature. 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 helps children to understand and connect with seasonal rhythms through enjoying certain food at different points in the year. Following seasonal cooking also introduces children to the idea of sustainability and the benefits of eating local and seasonal food. Even with limited space, planting and growing is possible throughout the year. A herb garden can be added to an outside area or a window ledge inside and vegetables can be grown in a small container.

“The child... who has cared for another living thing... is more easily led to care for [their] own life.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.129



Fig. 9: Children help to prepare the vegetable patch. Growing vegetables is a rewarding experience and allows children to gain a better understanding of where food comes from



Fig. 10: Harvesting peas from the garden

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. Froebel believed children should be connected to the natural world and

through planting children can see the 'whole' and interconnected experience of food - from planting seeds to growing, harvesting, eating and composting.



Fig. 11: The children made rhubarb crumble from the rhubarb that has been harvested from their key educator's garden. Eating local, home-grown food helps to introduce children to food sustainability



Fig. 12: Checking the compost. Involving children in the whole process of cooking helps them to see the interconnecting parts

Community links



Fig. 13: Cooking together at home

Cookery presents many opportunities to connect with the family and the wider community. Froebel believed that children should feel a sense of connection between home and school and that educators should work in close partnership with parents and carers.

Community links can be promoted through everyday cooking opportunities. This could be through sharing food within the setting with friends, sitting down with an adult at the snack table, children taking food home to share with their families or inviting parents and carers to come in to help with cooking. Recipe cards or books, stories linked to cooking and cooking photos can be shared regularly with families and they can be invited to reciprocate and share cooking and food experiences from home.



Fig. 14: Creating home and school links through cookery. Recipes can be shared with families so children can enjoy cooking at home

“Educators should find the common threads that can bind a community together, the unity in diversity.”

Tovey 2017, p.121



Fig. 15: Making chapati. Valuable community links can be made as families share favourite recipes or cultural traditions

Festivals and special occasions provide a time to prepare and share food together and learn about different cultures. They 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.

“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.”

McCormick 2012, p.153



Fig. 16: A child ices their Christmas cake. Cooking is a powerful way to learn about traditions and festivals

Cookery and the unique child

A Froebelian approach values the uniqueness of each child and rather than focusing on what the child cannot do, the starting point is always what the child can do. Some children might not be ready to engage with the whole cooking process and might just need to explore and taste the ingredients first. All efforts from the child should be valued and cooking sessions can be adapted or changed depending on how best to support the needs of the child. This might be needing to cook in smaller groups or one to one with an adult.

The learning story to the right shares how Sam's interest in cooking has grown and how this has supported his communication. Sam has formed a trusting relationship with his key person, and they have supported and guided him as he has developed his cooking, becoming more and more autonomous as the year has gone on.

Sam's learning story

Sam loves to bake. He gets very excited and makes sounds to express his happiness. His favourite food to make is biscuits, particularly gingerbread men. He will often take an adult's hand and lead them to the cooking table as a way to show them he wants to bake.

Figs. 17a, b and c: Over the year Sam becomes an independent cook, learning how to mix dough and create his biscuits. He makes links with his learning as he refers back to his favourite book



Cooking activities with Sam often begin as a sensory experience. He likes to look at the ingredients, touch them and smell them. We are working on following a recipe together but usually Sam prefers to watch as an adult mixes and makes a dough. When it is made Sam will take some and hold it up to the light. He will do this and say, "Wow" or "Yum, yum" as he looks at it and then tastes it. Sam will use his hands to communicate and try to sign 'eat' and 'more' as he loves to smell and taste the dough.

With support and many opportunities to revisit his favourite activity Sam has been able to make links within his cooking. Exploring a gingerbread man at the start and then working backwards, to explore the separate ingredients and how they combine, has helped Sam understand the process.

He can now confidently find and use a rolling pin when we make a dough. He can select a cutter and press it down and he is working on carefully pulling the dough through and putting it on the baking tray.

We have noticed Sam is most relaxed when he is cooking. He seems able to express himself more clearly during this time and does this through eye contact, sound and gesture. In a recent cooking session Sam was able to make a gingerbread man and then point to it in a book. He looked towards an adult to show them too and said, "Yum, yum. There!" This is a huge achievement for Sam and one of his most confident and clear attempts to vocalise his thinking.



Fig. 18: Sam shares his interest in making biscuits with an adult

A nurturing experience

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.

By giving responsibility and showing respect, a child's confidence and self-esteem can be nurtured. The real-life experience of cookery 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 create something to eat. There is pride in the result of following a recipe, mastering a new skill and creating something to share and eat with somebody. The social aspect of sharing food together helps to support positive relationships and a sense of community. It also presents opportunities to share ideas about making healthy choices about the food we eat.



Fig. 19: A shared experience - cooking together creates trusting relationships. Educators are respectful of children's starting points and introduce cooking experiences in a nurturing way

Cookery, play and the curriculum

“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, p.153

Froebel emphasised the need for an integrated curriculum where all areas of learning come together in a meaningful whole (Tovey 2017).

Cookery achieves this by covering all areas of the curriculum, from making and reading recipes, counting, measuring and estimating ingredients and manipulating and using tools and utensils. It provides opportunities to explore texture, shape and form, find out about where food comes from, and learn about changes of state. Cookery also presents endless opportunities for conversation and developing language and communication. It also requires children to ‘have a go’ and try new things, be confident, independent and motivated.



Fig. 20a: ‘Pumpkin Soup’ is a great story to connect to cooking experiences. Props and resources are shared so children can re-tell the story



Fig. 20b: The children make pumpkin and vegetable soup over the bonfire



Fig. 20c: The children scoop out the inside of the pumpkin and the pumpkin seeds are roasted to have at snack time

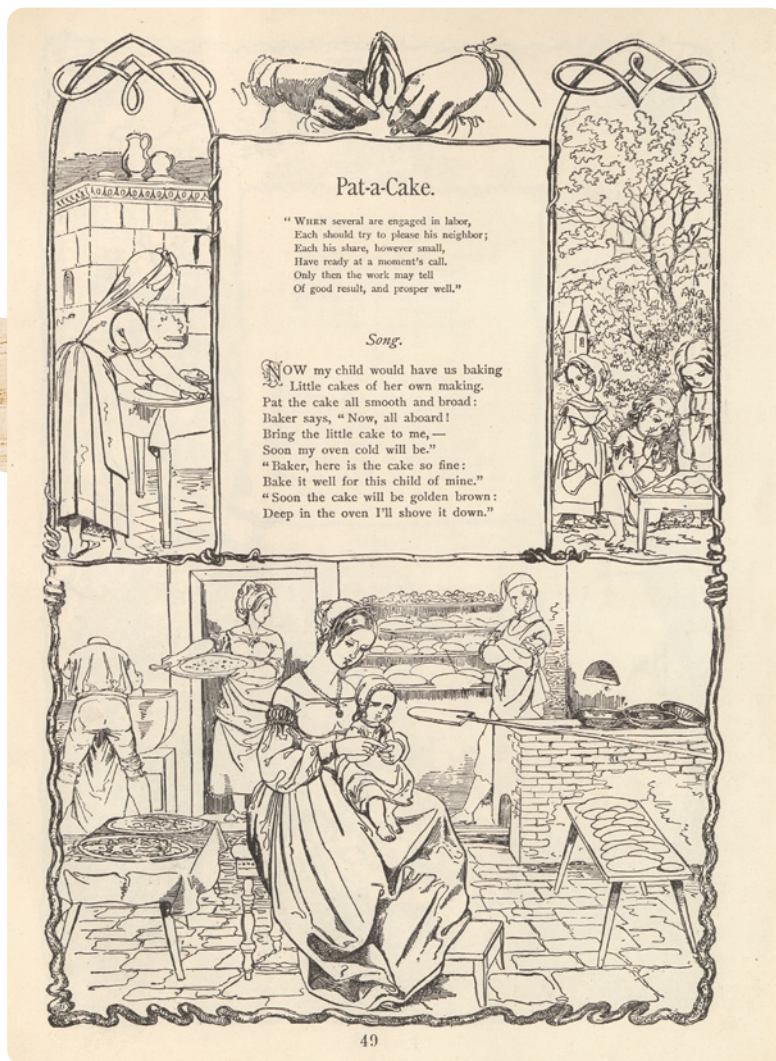


Fig. 21: 'Pat-a-Cake' from Froebel's *Mother-Play and Nursery Songs*

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). Khan points out that 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, p.14). Providing numerous opportunities in your setting where children can engage in imaginative and symbolic play is important. Children might be observed making 'chocolate cake' at the clay table, 'soup' in the mud kitchen or 'dinner' in the home corner. Through observing children in their play, their interests can be developed and meaningful links can be made to their cooking experiences.

Cookery also links to stories and rhymes. Froebel's *Mother Songs* suggested finger rhymes and games for mothers and the wider family to share at home with their children. Many of the songs highlighted every-day life and helped to make connections with the child's experience and the wider world (Tovey 2017).

Dyke (2019) emphasises the importance of making songs meaningful for the child, so they are singing about what they know and are experiencing.

Finding stories and rhymes for children to enjoy which make connections with their cookery experience supports their learning, play and understanding of the world. Children will also enjoy making up songs and rhymes which link to the real-life experiences they are involved in. Starting with a rhyme or story can be a great way to introduce a new recipe or cooking experience or type of food. Developing a story collection, linked to cooking and sharing food, particularly thinking about your community, and choosing books which reflect your children's backgrounds and families is a powerful way of promoting a sense of belonging.

Final thoughts

Cooking is an incredibly rewarding experience and establishing it in your setting provides unique learning experiences for children and adults. Embedding it as part of your core provision does not happen instantly, so don't be afraid to start slowly. It is important to keep your children's interests and needs at the centre of what you do, work together as a team, share ideas and concerns and be willing to 'have a go'.

Here are some tips to help you:

- Set up the space to cook in an organised and inviting way. Each child should have their own bowl and workspace. A recipe can be shared clearly for children to see, involving them in what they will be making. Have utensils and ingredients ready so children can access them independently. This ensures the adult can stay present and guide the children through the cooking process in a meaningful way.
- Cooking with a small group of children is valuable and engaging. Adults have time to interact and support children effectively. Time can be taken to discuss the recipe and explore the ingredients. In this way cookery is 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. This means 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, enjoying a range of sensory experiences.
- Include children in all elements of the cooking experience and give them ownership over what they cook. They should have the opportunity to safely observe the food going into the oven to be cooked, but also tidy away after themselves. Involving children in each stage helps them see how the whole process interconnects.
- 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 clay area.
- Cooking connects to other first-hand experiences which settings might wish to introduce. For example, growing a vegetable patch, offering cooking opportunities outdoors on the bonfire and taking the children on trips to the shops to buy ingredients.





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Watch

Let's Cook! A Froebel Trust short film all about cooking and developing community connections in early years settings (produced in July 2023): www.froebel.org.uk/case-studies/lets-cook

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