

PLAY IDEAS BANK

Practical Ideas for Creative Play - A comprehensive collection for Playworkers & Playschemes everywhere

No. 5

COOKING



Experience shows that children love a cooking session. History shows that the preparation and sharing of food plays a central role in practically every known culture and society. Put the two together and you can see why cookery deserves a place on every play project. But it takes a bit of forethought and planning to make the most of it.

This leaflet, by Harry Shier, is about creating opportunities for children to cook proper food on all kinds of play projects. It doesn't contain recipes, but there is a companion leaflet, **PLAYSCHEME RECIPES** to get you started.

The Kitchen

If you are based in a Playground building or Play Centre, you should have a kitchen you can use without difficulties. If you use a community centre, school or village hall, there will still be a kitchen, but you may have to negotiate the children's right to cook in it. If "the management" is reluctant, go for a trial run to let the children prove they can work safely and leave things as they would wish to find them (if they can't they don't deserve to cook anyway!). Nine times out of ten, the size of the kitchen will restrict you to very small groups - more about this later. But as long as there's a working cooker and a surface to work on you'll be able to cook something good.

An alternative is a portable camping gas cooker that you can set up anywhere. As long as it is supported on a firm, stable surface and sensibly positioned so it is away from the main flows of activity, ball-games etc. this should be quite acceptable.

The third alternative is a real fire: more about this below.

Pots and Pans

If your kitchen isn't adequately equipped, put the word out in advance and it's amazing how many old but still usable pots, pans and utensils parents can find in their cupboards. If investing in your own, it's worth saving up for decent thick-bottomed pans.

Safety

Safety rules will vary from one kitchen to another, but here are some you should not overlook:

- * Cooker never left unsupervised when it's on.
- * Children don't move cooker controls, except with specific agreement.
- * There should be a fire blanket fully accessible near the cooker (not immediately above it, or you'll never reach it if there's a fire). Fire extinguishers should be installed according to expert recommendations and checked regularly.
- * All cooks must wash hands before they start. Dry with hand drier or **clean** towel.
- * Take extra care with hot oil or fat - can be much hotter than boiling water.
- * Extra care also with tossing pancakes or other activities that risk splashing hot fat or liquids.
- * Have an accessible first aid kit, regularly checked.
- * In case of a burn or scald, run cold water on it for ten minutes, apply a clean, plain dressing and get help from a qualified first aider, doctor or nurse.
- * Never lock yourselves in the kitchen. No matter how much disruption comes from outside you must not restrict the children's exit.

Real Fires

Most of the kitchen safety rules apply, but there are a number of extra points to add:

- * Check that fires are permitted before you start.
- * Check you have buckets of water or a hose-pipe ready **before** you light the fire.
- * Direct adult supervision of open fires at all times.
- * Double-check fire is properly doused when finished.
- * Avoid burns: Have oven-gloves or suitable substitute for lifting things on and off the fire. Use tongs to handle food when frying or grilling.
- * Ensure a firm, steady support for pans over fire e.g. metal grille supported on bricks.



A good fire for outdoor cooking is a brazier made from an old oil-drum. Bash holes in the sides and bottom with a pick-axe to allow air to flow. Put a metal grille on top.



What to Cook

You can have a lot of fun with food - pink sugar mice, rainbow-coloured fairy cakes etc. - but if you want you can also cook **real food** that is wholesome and nourishing. This needs more thought and commitment, but in the long run it is a more responsible approach to give children opportunities to cook food that is good for them.

It's important to be realistic; if you suddenly switch to a sugar-free wholefood regime that challenges the children's established tastes, you can't expect instant success. Do move towards healthier cooking, but do also remember that playwork is mainly about what the children want to do themselves.

WATCH OUT FOR

- * Excessive use of sugar: Few children will brush their teeth afterwards. Many are already conditioned to a constant diet of sweets, but it won't do any harm to offer something different.
- * Excessive use of fat: Most children can deal with reasonable amounts of fat, but remember that tastes which could prove disastrous in later life are becoming firmly established in childhood.
- * Chemical additives, in particular artificial colouring: There is increasing medical evidence of harmful effects. Some children show allergic reactions or changes in behaviour.

ALTERNATIVES

When children are used to lots of sweets, refined sugar, processed, coloured and chemically flavoured food, it can be quite a challenge to make wholesome food acceptable and interesting, but cooking something yourself on a playscheme must be the best possible start.

- * Don't always fall back on sweet recipes. Try more savoury food that is just as much fun to cook: soups, pizzas, meals from many cultures,
- * Try recipes that use unrefined (brown) sugar or flour instead of white.
- * Try recipes that use fruit, fresh or dried, but don't need lots of added sugar.
- * Cook with fresh vegetables. Experiment with some of the less familiar vegetables available from the local supermarket.
- * Explore real alternatives to processed foods. E.g. most children think custard comes out of a tin. How is custard really made? How does the tin compare

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

All weights should be **METRIC**; don't confuse children with two different systems. Get children to do all the weighing and measuring - it's an important basic cookery skill. You'll need a good robust set of scales.

Cultural Needs

Many playworkers will be working with groups of children from different religious or cultural traditions. Some traditions specify what can be eaten, when or how. It can be seen as at best a cause of embarrassment, at worst offensively racist to be ignorant of your group's needs.

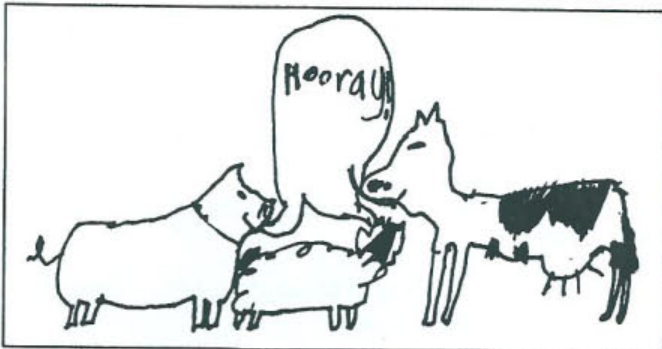
For example, most Jews and Muslims don't eat pig-meat. Many require meat to be killed according to tradition. Many Muslims fast completely during daylight hours throughout the month of Ramadan. Many Jews do not eat meat and dairy products at the same meal. Many Hindus do not eat beef and many more are completely vegetarian.

In every culture, people make choices about what is acceptable for themselves. It is important to be aware of the basic dietary principles of different cultures, but important also to check with children and parents before jumping to conclusions.

On any play project it is best to make and serve food which can be enjoyed together by **all the children**. Don't cook food that excludes any group of users.

Meat?

There are an increasing number of families who don't eat meat, for religious and other reasons. The chances are you will have vegetarian children using your scheme. Considering this, along with the cultural requirements described above, it is clear that an overall "meat-free" policy makes good sense for many play projects. It will mean that nearly **all** parents can be sure your cookery sessions will respect their wishes.



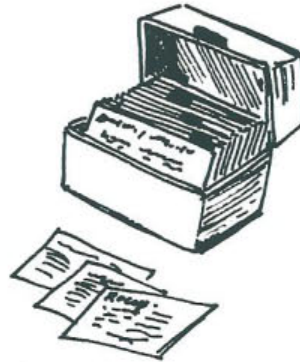
J. Shier

It shouldn't cause any problems in everyday practice (unless you're very keen on barbecues).

Recipes

Lots of good cooks cook by experience and instinct, and don't follow recipes, but with children it is safest to stick to recipes - at least at first. Learning to follow a recipe is itself a useful skill, as is learning to scale it up or down for the size of your group.

You can use the Play Ideas Bank leaflet "Playscheme Recipes" as a starting point and build up a collection. The ideal thing for a play project is your own card file of recipes.



Start it off with your proven favourites and as you try new ones add new cards.

Simplify the instructions, step by step, adjust all amounts to the appropriate metric measurements and write them out clearly so the children can easily read them.

When cooking, pin up the recipe card where it won't get messy and all can see it. An alternative is to write out the day's recipe on a large sheet of paper for all to read. Get the children to read and follow the recipe themselves. If your group is new to this, start with simpler recipes.

Multi-Cultural Cooking

Choose the food you cook to reflect and celebrate the many cultural traditions in our society: Recipes form around the world, or, more to the point, recipes from the different cultural traditions within your own community. There is no shortage of books on cookery from all over the world, but better by far if you can involve people, parents, volunteers or sessional workers (if not your existing team), who already have the knowledge and experience. You and the children can learn new techniques and principles at first hand.

Remember that many children are not keen on unfamiliar foods. Do keep trying to broaden their horizons, but be sensitive if they don't respond immediately!

Your Group

For most play projects, cookery has to mean working in small groups. If you have lots of children, either:

- a) Break down the recipe into different jobs. Which jobs can be done at the same time by different children, which enable children to take turns. Or..
- b) Choose a quick and easy recipe, which can be completed by several groups in turn, e.g. pancakes, or simple biscuit recipes. Working through five groups of five children in a 2½ hour session is quite possible, but utterly exhausting!

GROUND RULES

Establish agreed ground rules with the children before they start. Ask each one to say that they definitely understand and agree the ground rules and you're well on the way to a trouble-free cooking session. The rules you decide on will vary, but here are some ideas:

- * All wash hands first.
- * All understand and agree safety rules (see front page).
- * All agree to do their share of the washing up and clearing up afterwards.
- * No fingers in the food or licking utensils till finished (If mixing by hand, e.g. pastry, scrub hands specially well and inspect before you start).
- * Agree who is to eat the food: Is it to be shared round whole scheme, kept for a later occasion, or do cooks have prior claim on it?

All this may seem a bit heavy, but then so is having a major row with a child who grabs more than their share of the food, or runs off and refuses to help clear up. Usually children will be enthusiastic and eager to get started and will happily agree ground rules as long as the reasons are made clear.

GIRLS AND BOYS IN THE KITCHEN

Experience shows that both boys and girls love cooking sessions; they can work well with boys, girls or mixed groups as long as you don't let one group dominate. Boys, however, get less encouragement at home to clear up after them and may need gentle

pressure to make sure they do their share. DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO RUN OFF AND LEAVE IT TO THE GIRLS - even if the girls seem happy to do it.

EATING IT

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT THE FOOD IS DOLED OUT FAIRLY. It should be done by someone you can trust to be fair - if necessary by an adult.

Last Thoughts

FOOD TO SELL

You can make food to sell at fetes, fun-days, discos and all kinds of fund-raising events. You may not make a huge profit, but it allows the children to be fully involved in the fund-raising effort. "Decorate your own Fairy-Cake" stalls have been seen around a lot recently but do not generally reflect a healthy eating philosophy!

BARBECUES

Barbecues and bonfire cook-ins are a fun event on any project with outdoor facilities. Organising a successful meat-free barbecue, however, would require a large amount of flair and imagination, and is not everyone's cup of tea.

Ensure any charcoal lighting blocks or fluid you use are kept under lock and key.

CAMPS AND RESIDENTIAL HOLIDAYS

These are the ideal opportunity for children to cook real food. The whole group will be depending on each other. It is quite possible for children (with good supervision) to cook all the food themselves on a camp or holiday away. Plan it with them in advance, organise work teams and rotas, make sure everyone agrees it's part of the deal before you set off and you will have a great time.

Books

For recipe books see the PLAYScheme RECIPES leaflet.

Wickers, David: The Camp Fire book (Studio Vista, 1976)

- Good for fire-building and outdoor cookery techniques.

Towards a Safer Adventure Playground (NPFA, 1985)

For more Play Ideas Bank leaflets go to:

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