

Separating food-based play and non-taste sensory play (plain version)

It can be useful to separate food play from other sensory play to help children learn what is safe to eat and what isn't. However, creating this separation can sometimes be tricky. One helpful approach is to set up distinct areas for food play and non-food sensory activities. This clear physical divide helps children understand that these activities are different. It's also helpful to use consistent verbal and visual cues to indicate whether an activity involves food or not. For instance, you might have specific aprons or tablecloths for food play.

Here are some detailed strategies for setting up these different types of play spaces effectively:

- Use brightly coloured cooked or uncooked grains and pastas combined with toys or plastic scissors for play. These look distinctly different from the food served at meals, helping children understand the difference between play items and food.
- When using naturally coloured dried pasta, lentils, and beans in sensory bins with toys for scooping, explain that these are uncooked foods and are not for eating. Incorporate cooked versions of these foods in separate edible play sessions and discuss the differences between the textures and appearances of cooked and uncooked foods.
- Avoid playdough scented with food flavouring to prevent confusion. Use colours not typically associated with most foods, such as blue or bright purple, and consider adding sparkle if the additional texture is not an issue. This helps distinguish playdough from edible items.
- Be cautious with 'edible paint' recipes as they can send mixed messages about what is safe to eat. Instead, consider using actual foods for painting during fully edible play sessions. For example, using mashed fruits or vegetables as paint can be a fun and safe alternative.
- When using vegetables and fruits for printing activities, clearly explain that these items are for painting and not for eating because they are covered in paint. Choose items like potatoes or chunks of leek, which are not typically eaten raw, to make the concept easier to understand.
- Adapt or avoid certain activities for children who frequently put non-food items in their mouths, especially if there is a risk of choking. Ensure all activities are safe and suitable for each child's needs.

Importance of exploration

It is important to allow children to explore edible foods without abrupt interruptions. Keeping taste-safe foods clearly separate reduces the need for warnings due to safety concerns. An urgent or loud 'Stop! Don't put that in your mouth!' can create negative associations with the food and deter a child from trying it again in the future.

Scan QR code below for more information on exploring food and drinks away from meal and snack times

