



Food for THOUGHT

The *Every Child* editorial team invited me to write this article in response to queries about why food should not be used as a play material with children. In 1997, I first raised this issue in *Snails live in houses too: Environmental education for the early years* (Elliott & Emmett). It is somewhat concerning that almost two decades later this issue persists. So, again I am questioning: Why do educators use 'food for play'?

Common arguments include: the affordability and convenience of food such as rice and pasta; food is safer for play due to the possibility of ingestion; and, food is a different sensory experience. Some years ago I even heard that mashed pumpkin and chocolate instant pudding was used as finger paint for toddlers! Other excuses were that the food was donated, past the expiry date or fed to birds after play; therefore, absolving educators of any ethical responsibilities.

The impacts of climate change and global inequities have shifted our valuing of the Earth's resources and the rationale for avoiding 'food for play' is now even stronger. Quite simply, why would one use 'food for play' when food security for many people in both majority and minority world countries is tenuous?

Food suitable for human consumption is produced at a high cost to the environment; just consider the energy and resources that contribute to everyday food items. Globally, the human population is now living well beyond the biocapacity of the Earth and the priority must be food for human consumption only. At times, educators suggest that food is plentiful and readily available in Australia and therefore, there is no harm in using 'food for play'. But, what are we modelling about social justice, intergenerational equity and sustainability when 'food for play' is the unquestioned practice? For example, many early childhood educators work with low-income or refugee families who may struggle with sourcing enough nutritious food. From these perspectives, I argue that it is unconscionable to present food as a play material. Also, consider the potential for children experiencing conflicting messages about when food is for play and when is it consumed as a daily ritual and not wasted. Avoiding 'food for play' promotes a clear message about the ecological and socio-cultural values of food.

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If your service is using 'food for play', it is time to urgently rethink and re-evaluate your principles, ethics and resulting practices. Rethink and change play resources and practices; children and educators can be both more sustainable and creative together. For example: Why place rice in a shaker when gravel, shells or buttons would offer a similar sound effect? Why thread pasta or print with potatoes when diverse reusable or waste materials can be employed? In any discussion about 'food for play', experiences such as playdough, finger paint and goop are invariably raised. These don't look like food on our plates, offer unique sensory play value and can be reused many times over before being composted. How each service or educator deals with these particular experiences requires considered reflection as there is no absolute right or wrong.

There are many ways that children can meaningfully engage with food in early childhood programs; these encompass ways that demonstrate respect for and valuing of food including productive gardening and cooking (McCrea, 2015). Food is essential to human life and something that fundamentally interconnects humans with the Earth and its resources; let's not squander them for play. This approach is supported by the *National Quality Standards* 'Standard 3.3: The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future' (ACECQA, 2013, pp. 99–102) and also specifically links with Outcome 2 in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009).

Dr Sue Elliott
 Senior Lecturer, University of New England

References

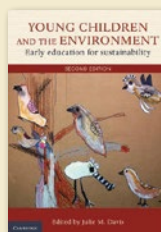
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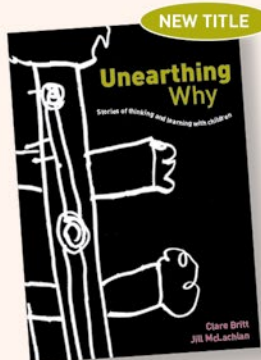
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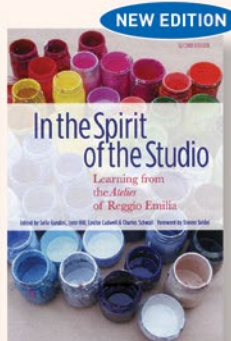
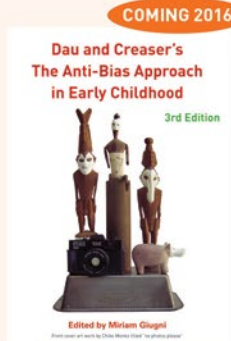


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