

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

Feeding Our Children Well

by Dawn Rouse

When you ask any adults about their favorite foods, you can instantly get a clear picture of their family culture and traditions. Foods, culturally, define us and make us not only part of our families but of society as well. With these strong emotional ties to our foods and the familial connotations they hold, the feeding of the children in our programs can be an extremely sensitive topic. As early childhood professionals, we need to be committed to nutrition in our programs, yet sensitive to family traditions and cultural variations.

During my years as an infant caregiver, I found that one of the initial basic trusts established between child, caregiver, and parents revolves around food. As the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, feeding equates to love and caring. Will the person to whom these parents are entrusting their child feed her enough? Recognize when she is hungry? Overfeed her? If you have breast feeding moms, how will the infants relate to you, the bottle bearer? Will their attachments to their mothers change?

How you as the caregiver deal with these first situations can set the tone for your entire relationship with the children and their parents. Honest discussion and sharing of philosophies are the only way to begin a healthy relationship.

As the children get older, parents' questions often focus on the topic of food. When to start solids; what to feed first, fruits or vegetables; how to do it are all questions which need to be handled gently and with respect for each family's

situation. I do advise parents to discuss these issues with their family pediatrician as well as with me.

When a child and family are ready to take the leap into the world of fruits and vegetables, I begin parent education around basic nutrition, allergies, and fruit and vegetable identification. I have developed handouts over the years using snippets from various sources.

Although some parents prefer using commercially made jar foods, I encourage my infant parents to make their own baby food. I usually get at least one raised eyebrow at this suggestion. However, when they learn that all it takes is ice cube trays, freezer bags, and something to puree the food with, they become very interested.

Not only is making your own baby food economical — just compare the price of one jarred serving of sweet potatoes to an ice cube tray of many servings of a real, cooked sweet potato — but it is also the ultimate way of ensuring that you *know* what is in your child's food and the source of those foods. Parents can choose locally grown, pesticide and chemical free fruits and vegetables and prepare foods that are free of salts, excess water, and questionable fillers. You also are not using the quarts of glass and paper products used in the manufacturing of the jars themselves.

As adults, we know that fresh tastes better! Our children deserve to experience the same fresh tastes that we enjoy so much. Think about it. Would you prefer



Dear Reader,

By now you are well into your routine with your new group of children. Time for an injection of some fun, easy things to do with your kids. That's the idea of the "Good Ideas" section of this column. Nothing profound, just easy to implement ideas, homemade toys, simple activities that add variety and enjoyment to the time you and the children spend together. Everyone comes up with these. Please share your "good ideas" with other infant and toddler staff around the country by sending in a brief description to the address at the end of the column. A photo or slide is optional, and it doesn't have to be typed, if that's not convenient for you. We'd all love to hear from you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Miller".

Karen Miller is the author of *Ages and Stages, Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and her new book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House, 1996).

to eat gray canned peas or fresh or frozen green peas? Eating is a rich sensory experience. Color, aroma, and texture are all vital to the pleasure of eating.

Some parents run into resistance, not from the child but from grandparents and other well-meaning family and friends. The attitude “it was good enough for you” can make some parents doubt that they are doing the right thing. I remind these parents that when they were children the predominant attitude was that science knew how to nourish children better than their families, so came the rise of formulas and jarred baby food. I encourage them to trust their gut instinct as parents. I feel that by empowering them to really think these issues through we are encouraging them to use their hearts and minds in conjunction and empowering them as competent parents.

I do think that, on the whole, children who experience a wide range of freshly prepared foods tend to be better eaters. They transition to finger foods beauti-

fully as they recognize the tastes, just in a more solid form. These children additionally have usually been eating smaller pureed versions of what the family has been eating, so making the move to finger food meals is generally very smooth.

Finally, my strongest reason for encouraging making your own baby food is the inclusion of the child into the family mealtime. One of my favorite thoughts is to feed your child in the style in which you eat. By making your infant's food from the foods you are cooking for yourself, you are inducting your child into your family traditions and culture. Sometimes parents tell me that because of having a child they are cooking for, they begin to examine their own eating patterns and start to make healthier choices. Your child will want to eat whatever you are eating. Many a day I share my lunch with several children who know I must be eating something pretty tasty! Being included in mealtimes is a powerful social message. This is when so much is learned about what is acceptable behavior at the

family table, how to use utensils, and individual family expectations.

By encouraging parents in your program to make their own infant's foods, you are setting the stage for a lifestyle of healthful eating, as well as assisting them to become a family in a cultural sense of the word. What better gift could we give the children in our care?



Dawn Rouse is director of the Somersworth Child Care Center in Somersworth, New Hampshire.

Good Ideas . . .

Easy Divide

The Acacia Cottage child care center in Castle Hill, New South Wales, Australia, has created large, polyester fiberfill stuffed “snakes” to use as dividers in their infant



rooms. They simply sewed large tubes of scrap fabric together and stuffed them. The beauty is their flexibility. They can easily be moved, and the shape and size of the enclosure can be adjusted. They can be used to separate non-mobile infants from older crawling and toddling infants or, as seen here, to allow a caregiver to give a child some one-on-one attention.

Box Tote

Sally Meyer, a parent educator with the Parents as Teachers program in Des Moines, Iowa, discovered that sturdy detergent boxes with plastic handles make great free toys for young toddlers who love containers of any kind, especially those with handles. They love putting small toys inside, carrying them around by the handle, and dumping them out again.

Photo to Go Home

Nicco Cook at the Trinity Infant & Child Care Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, takes an instant photo of a visiting child playing with the toys and other children on a pre-enrollment visit, while the child is comfortable with his or her parent in the room. This is given to the parent and child to take home with them. Now the parents have something to show the child as they talk positively about the new child care arrangement.

Smoothie Breaks

Patty Mores at the Child Development Center at Florissant Valley St. Louis Community College in Missouri rubs toddlers hands and forearms with hand lotion to calm them down. They call this small ritual a “smoothie break” and it is enjoyed by everyone.

Open Discussion

What do you use for child assessment?

Judy Gaines, who works at River College Early Childhood Center, would like to improve their assessment processes for one and two year olds. Let's talk about this in a future issue. What do you do? Is there any particular assessment instrument you like?

Judy already keeps copies of some of the notes she sends home, takes photos, and jots down skills and interests of the children. She'd like guidelines about what to look for and how to keep track, and would like to avoid using checklists. Yet she doesn't want something that's so involved that it will take forever. So, she wants to know, how do you incorporate assessment into your program so that it's a natural part of your day and doesn't require extra hours?

A different opinion about staff children

In our March column, **Tonja Deviney** asked about our experiences having staff children in our child care programs. Alyssa Lang described her positive experience in our July column. Now here is another response — from **Penelope Kirk** of Daylight Daycare, Inc. in Wayland, Massachusetts:

“As a child care consultant, I was asked by the Office for Children in my area to spend 17 hours observing a center which had a number of complaints, none warranting loss of license but enough to raise concern.

The behavior of one co-director who had two children in her center caught my attention immediately. The boy was the age of Alyssa Lang's and the girl was four. Before the first visit was over, it was very apparent that the staff was extremely frustrated by the favoritism displayed to the children and the lack of trust conveyed to

the teachers. The little girl was allowed to leave her class at any time, even during nap time, and while I was there went down a flight of stairs alone to the nursery to “check on” her brother. In fact, she woke him.

Another day during my visit, a child fell from a high chair causing a certain amount of upset. The director, who had been filling in for an absent assistant, took her son to her office, leaving the class and the distraught teacher.

If these things happened during my visits, I wonder how many other things took place in my absence? The director/mother and I had several discussions about this, particularly after my first report. She simply could not accept that she was showing any favoritism or that her motherly attention was causing any morale problems among the staff. Indeed, according to the other co-director, the problem was basic to the problems of the center.

The outcome of my six week involvement was that the co-directors split up. The mother/director now runs the center herself, having bought out the other co-director. I am told that many of the staff have or are planning to leave. The other director is going to open a new center, and tells me she is very grateful for the advice and observations I made. They brought closure to a number of issues that had been festering for some time.

Child care is a complicated business. Human emotions run high most of the time. The pull of the parent/child relationship is naturally the strongest of all. Witness the adjustment new parents have to make when they first start a child in your center. They need enormous support and empathy. Add to that collection of emotions the demands of professional integrity. To put it mildly, it's difficult.

As a manager, I do not hire people who require their own child be in the center.

One exception was a center I put in place where the director's office was far removed from the nursery where her child was. This was a compromise with which I was never really pleased. A strain existed despite all the good intentions.

In sum, I suggest that in the name of professionalism the mother/child combination be removed from the workplace. I would be very interested to receive opinions with reasons, from whoever has further points to make, pro or con.”

So . . . let's hear from you! What have your experiences been?

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to:
Karen Miller
PO Box 97
Cowdrey, CO 80434