

Everybody Loves the Cook!

by Nancy H. Brown

Nancy H. Brown, Ph.D is now consulting in early childhood and technology, Nancy considers her work as a child care center director to have been her most favorite job. She directed centers in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and North Carolina.



"Amanda is a very picky eater. She will never get enough to eat unless I bring her lunch."

"Brandon is overweight and I want you to make sure he doesn't eat too much food."

"My daughter, Sarah, will never eat that kind of food. I have to fight with her to eat at all."

Directors hear statements like these all the time from enrolled families, prospective parents, and teachers in their program. Conversations and concerns regarding children and food are popular among parents and teachers. At a fundamental level, caring for young children means feeding them and meeting their nutritional needs. From a parent's first visit to a prospective center — including a tour of the kitchen — to monthly menus posted and distributed to parents, and daily conversations about "what she ate," the focus on children's eating habits and attitudes is primary.

For children the connection between food and the person preparing the food is clear. We nurture children in many ways; one of the first and most enduring connections for children, then, is between the person who feeds them and their feeling of being cared for. The person responsible for the food program in many early childhood programs is the cook. No wonder so many directors can say of their cook, "This is the most popular person here! Everyone loves her!"

Healthy eating: Families share the goals of the cook

Healthy eating is about more than just food and eating. Eating is a social experience. Many of our fondest childhood memories include memories of

sharing a meal with family members and friends. Families gather in the kitchen and around the table to enjoy each other's company, to laugh and talk, as well as to eat. Cultural differences may affect the types of foods we eat and how the food is prepared and served, but across cultures mealtimes are important times for bonding and coming together as a family or community. Food experiences can serve the same role in early childhood programs.

Healthy eating is also a learning time. During mealtimes at home, children:

- Learn about their family members and themselves.
- Discuss the events of the day and create dreams for tomorrow.
- Learn about food and eating: new foods and old favorites.
- Learn their families' values related to physical health, acceptable table manners, and the importance of sharing the preparation, serving, and clean-up responsibilities.
- Learn about nutrition: recipes and preparations, the effects of boiling, baking, or freezing.

The same kind of learning experiences can be incorporated into the early childhood program. The cook plays an important role in creating healthy eating behaviors and attitudes in young children.

Roles of the cook: Programs and directors benefit

The cook can influence the children's program with her attitude about nutrition and her knowledge of the social and cognitive learning opportunities available to children through food and eating experiences. The increasing incidence of obesity and Type 2 diabetes among children requires all adults working with

young children to incorporate healthy eating and exercise into their educational curriculum. Needless to say, the cook who keeps children and teaching staff happy is an asset to any program and a daily blessing to every director. Considering the importance of food in our lives, the cook is a knowledgeable contributor to classroom curriculum planning. There are, however, many factors that affect a cook's success in his/her role:

- The cook must be organized in preparing meals and snacks to fit with the program schedule and staff and children's needs.
- The cook must follow sanitation requirements related to food preparation areas, utensils, cooking containers, and storage units, taking pride in the cleanliness and appearance of her kitchen.
- The cook is careful to ensure that all appliances are maintained and working properly — refrigerator, freezer, dishwasher, and sanitizing equipment.
- Food must be served on time, at the proper temperature, and protected from any threat of contamination.
- The cook must be a skilled menu planner who welcomes the contributions of staff and children in her preparations.
- The cook maintains an accurate inventory of food and food-related supplies so that food orders are accurate and complete.

Good planning makes it possible to take advantage of grocery store/purveyor specials, to use more fresh produce, and to avoid the use of processed foods. Last minute trips to the grocery store cannot always be avoided, but they increase costs. The food storage system should be carefully monitored to ensure that food is rotated and not allowed to spoil or go unused.

Children love the cook: It works both ways

Shouts of glee welcome Miss Deanna when she enters a classroom. Children often want to stop by the kitchen to say "good morning" when they arrive each morning and to go tell her "good-bye" before leaving for the day. It's not surprising to learn that Miss Deanna knows every child and greets each child by name, offering a personal comment to each one. Nor is it surprising to hear her say that she has the best job in the program.

Why is this person so popular? Is it because she enjoys the children and they know it? Of course, that's part of it, but there's more to the story.

Why does this person love her job? Is it because the children love her and make her feel special and important? Of course, that's part of it, but there's more to the story.

The relationship between the cook and the children starts with the food. The cook prepares food that is appealing to the children; it tastes good and is easy for them to manage. The cook also provides them with choices; children can eat more of what they like and less or none of what they do not want.

When food and eating are a positive educational and social aspect of the program, children become engaged and participate. In some cases, children like Amanda become real ambassadors of the food program and teach their own parents more about healthy eating. There are always a few children who are more reluctant or "picky." In these situations, adults should not abandon their well planned food program and allow parents to bring food for their children. Instead, the response should be to offer children good food selections, to encourage opportunities to learn, and to allow children to make time to make their own decisions. This approach supports children and their development by:

- providing new information
- encouraging participation
- allowing children choices

These are elements of positive interactions with young children in all situations.

The cook can make the difference for many children who have been "picky" or whose eating patterns have been less healthy. After all, if a child is accustomed to sugary cereals and soda pop and has learned to manipulate adults by refusing to eat, turning this around will be challenging. However, the cook is identified as a special person in the program, and children are easily caught up in the enthusiasm that other children exhibit when the cook is around. When the cook welcomes the picky eater into her domain with warmth and attention, the child may have a more difficult time rejecting the food that has been so lovingly prepared. This is not to say that

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children who reject food at home do so because they do not like the cook/parent. We all know that children can act differently at home and school — particularly agreeing to do something at school that they have refused to do at home. Once parents recover from the surprise of seeing their child act in a more positive way at school, staff can encourage them to expect the same behaviors from their children at home.

When meals are delayed, children and teachers can experience real stress.

Staff need the cook: It's about collaboration

The timing of meals and snacks in many ways affects the timing of all other activities at school. So when the food service runs smoothly, the whole program benefits. When meals are delayed, children and teachers can experience real stress. Teachers want the menu to be reliable. This means:

- Substitutions are rare
- There is always enough food
- The menu meets the developmental and nutritional needs of children. For example, young children like to identify their foods, often shying away from casseroles and mixed vegetables. Toddlers are served finger food to encourage self-feeding.

Staff appreciate the cook who is considerate of the adults working in the program and not just the children. Teachers like the food to be appealing to their own tastes so that eating with the children is a pleasurable experience for them as well. Special touches, like placing healthy treats in the staff break room, are welcomed by the staff and supplement the

child-sized portions that may not satisfy their adult appetites.

Lack of time is one of the most common reasons given by children and adults for poor food choices and eating behaviors. Indeed, it does take time and energy to provide a sound food program. Too often, teachers and administrators fall into the same trap that may have snared some parents:

- They may think there is not enough time to collaborate with the cook in planning menus.
- They may think it's too difficult to incorporate food and nutrition activities into the curriculum.
- They may think it is not efficient to include children in menu planning.
- They may think it's easier and cheaper to design a 10-day rotating menu than to constantly refine the food program to respond to children's changing needs and interests.

Teachers may be correct in thinking it's easier to allow the cook to take charge of the food program, but consider the learning opportunities that are lost for children. It is also important to consider how using a rotating menu fails to appreciate the knowledge of the cook and the important role he/she plays in developing interesting, attractive, and healthy food choices for children, contributing to their understanding and appreciation for food. The cook is a teacher; when her expertise is valued, she can create a climate in the program where food and nutrition hold their rightful place in the educational curriculum. Teachers can be supported in recognizing, appreciating, and partnering with the cook who shares her expertise and welcomes their ideas about the menu.

Using Beginnings Workshop to
Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Meeting the big three: Does your program meet Brown's big three? Does your food program rarely substitute, always have enough food, and meet the developmental needs of children? Find out by doing spot observations for a week across age groups and classrooms. If problems are identified, work to resolve them.

Is everyone on board in your food program?: Are children, teachers, and families involved in your food program's menu planning? This idea is a powerful one to consider even if it sounds complicated. Ask for volunteers and get this process in place and working.

Connecting food experiences to learning: Brown nicely summarizes the many educational benefits of healthy eating. Brainstorm with teachers ways to integrate content knowledge (such as the food pyramid) and process knowledge (such as how to peel carrots or serve peanut butter). Plan to incorporate their ideas to provide plenty of skill practice for children who are learning to be healthy eaters.