**Food exploration and play: Tips for success for schools (plain version)**

Here are some practical ways for schools and nurseries to support children in exploring new foods

* To manage new and more difficult experiences, our bodies and minds need to feel calm and ready. Look at the ‘Getting ready to explore and play’ section on the toothPASTE website for more information.
* Begin by gathering insights from parents about each child’s food preferences and what they enjoy and can manage in different settings. Knowing more about each child’s sensory or motor challenges, allergies, and other safety concerns will help ensure activities are both safe and enjoyable.
* Maintaining a consistent structure for each session provides children with a comforting routine. Starting and ending each session in the same way allows children to feel secure, even when new experiences are introduced.
* From the beginning, reassure children that they don’t have to touch or try foods if they don’t feel comfortable. Setting clear expectations like this helps them feel safe and reduces any pressure.
* Encourage children to explore food at their own pace and comfort level, offering opportunities to engage without feeling forced. It can help to provide safe tools and clean surfaces so that children can interact with the food in a way that feels manageable.
* Children are more likely to feel curious and open when adults actively engage with food in a playful way. Model this by having fun with the food, showing that food play can be enjoyable. Let children take the lead whenever possible.
* Introducing foods gradually, through small steps, can make new experiences more comfortable. For example, you might start by just being in the same space as the food, then move on to looking at it, interacting with it using tools, and eventually touching and smelling it. Over time, this may lead to tasting, but there’s no rush.
* If children prefer more distance, start with longer-handled tools and slowly move to shorter tools as they grow more comfortable. Beginning with milder-smelling foods can also help children adjust at their own pace.
* It’s important to validate children’s reactions to new foods. If a child expresses dislike or discomfort, acknowledge their feelings and show curiosity by saying something like, “I see you don’t like this right now. Maybe the smell is a bit strong” This helps children feel understood while gently encouraging curiosity.
* Encouraging descriptive language can also be helpful. Guide children to describe how a food feels, smells, or changes when they touch or move it. Over time, this approach helps children anticipate different sensations and develop a positive relationship with new foods.

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