**Definitions before your read:**

1. ECERS- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales Assess the quality of your early childhood environment. This widely used program quality assessment instrument includes 43 items that evaluate the use of space, materials, and experiences in order to enhance children's development, daily schedule, and supervision. Designed for preschool, kindergarten, and child care classrooms serving children 2 1/2 through 5 years of age.
2. ITERS - Infant /Toddler Environmental Rating Scales - A thorough revision of the original ITERS, designed to assess center-based child care programs for infants and toddlers up to 30 months of age.

* Scale consists of 39 items organized into 7 subscales:
* Space and Furnishings
* Personal Care Routines
* Listening and Talking
* Activities
* Interaction
* Program Structure
* Parents and Staff

New curriculum and program items in the revised ITERS include: Helping children understand language; Nature/science; Use of TV, video and computer; Free play; and Group play activities. Items have been added to make the scale more inclusive and culturally sensitive, to address professional needs of staff, and to reflect the latest health and safety information.

**Using Food in the Classroom**

**A position statement, by Lisa Murphy**

 I use food in the classroom.  Not to be a rebel.  (Lisa Murphy, *the food user*!) I do it because I believe certain substances in the sensory tub provide a level of tactile exploration which is necessary for children.  I have been known to use beans, rice, cornmeal and flour too.  I use colored pasta for collage art and for stringing.  I make ooblick out of cornstarch and water and do nylon splat painting with un-popped popcorn kernels.  I use raw spaghetti and froot-loops for stacking.  I use corn syrup for edible finger paint.  I teach about chemical reactions with baking soda and vinegar.  I have been known to paint with pudding. With my toes.  But every point has a counter point and every rule has an exception.  The intention of this article is to share with you what I believe and why.  Like any controversial topic, discussion of food usage in the classroom cannot be limited to oversimplified statements such as “I use food” or “I don’t use food.”  You, as the educator, need to know why you have chosen one side or the other.   You also need to realize that there could very well be a time when you find yourself on the other side of the fence.   Are you ready for when that time comes?  Have you examined all sides of the issue or are you just doing what you were told to do without ever having thought about it yourself?

*Here is what I often hear on the road:*

 It’s disrespectful to certain cultures and populations.

* It’s wasteful.
* In school they told us not to.
* It teaches children to waste, play with their food, etc.
* Children are starving in some parts of the world.
* We/I am aligned with ECERS or ITERS
* Licensing said I can’t use it

 So, for the sake of conversation, let’s break it down.  My input:

**Number One:**  One of my first student teaching assignments was in a child care center located in one of the housing projects in inner city Chicago.  Out of respect for the drastic poverty many of these children lived in (some of the families slept in the abandoned cars in the parking lot), the program did not encourage using food in the classroom.  As I have gotten older and (dare I say, wiser?) I like to think that courtesy and common sense, *not a policy*, should guide us to make a program choice such as this. If you know, and I mean *know*, that there are families in the program who don’t know where their next meal is coming from, then playing with beans and rice in the sensory tub is not a respectful choice. But knowing is different than *assuming*.  And, if there really are families in this situation I would pose the following challenge:  Are we assisting these families in getting the service and assistance they require or is our level of involvement making sure they aren’t “offended” by the contents of our sensory tub?

**Number Two:**  I believe that to “not use food” because years ago one of your college professors told you not to, is not necessarily the best plan either.  As a professional you have a responsibility to think things through and make decisions that are in the best interest of the children in your current class.  Not just run on auto pilot with what you were taught years ago.  Children are always growing and changing.  We should be too.  If you have a child who is incredibly tactile and you are not providing ooblick because 10 years ago someone told you it was not okay to use corn starch (food products), you need to seriously consider the legitimacy of this rationale.   Take what you learned from past mentors and teachers and make it your own.  Add to it.  Modify it.  Adapt it.  Change your mind.  Continue deepening your education and awareness and knowledge of working with children.  Your own personal growth should not stop once you get that diploma.

**Number Three:**  Remember that there is always a squeaky wheel.  There will always be at least one mom or dad who doesn’t approve of the various activities you plan.  To stop having dyed pasta for collage art, or colored rice in the sensory tub, or to not make the ever popular corresponding snack after reading *Green Eggs and Ham* because Mrs. So-and-So doesn’t think it’s okay, is NOT and I repeat, is NOT a good enough reason to change your philosophical position!  If you go around changing everything each time she has a complaint you appear wishy-washy.   And believe you me, for that parent, there is *always* something, and if it’s not using food it *will* be something else!

So, what do you believe in?  Why?  Are you going to change the philosophy of your program for every parent who complains?  If you do, three things will happen:  1) you are going to create a lot of extra work for you and your staff, 2) you will appear too easily swayed by the slightest bit of blustery breeze and 3) you will undermine the credibility of the philosophy within the program because you are not standing up for what you believe in.  Changing your mind and position is one thing.  Having it constantly changed for you is another.   A more long-term solution is to provide opportunities for conversations (both formal and informal) about the rationale and theory that support all of the activities provided at your program on an ongoing and regular basis.

**Number Four:**  If you are going to align yourself with a “No Food” policy you really need to have thought about how far you are going to take it.  How does making playdough fit into this rule?  Think this through.  Seriously.  When folks tell me they “aren’t allowed to use food,” I love asking, “Do you make playdough?” And when they (always) say, “Yes.” It is hard for me to not point out that I can make a loaf of bread out of the ingredients that go into playdough.  Are we sending inconsistent messages? Are some food items okay but some others are not?  Who decided what was okay and what was not okay?   How were these items chosen?  Are all involved parties (staff, teachers, administration) clear not only on the items that are not okay but on the reasons why as well?  Can all parties articulate a clear and confident position statement to anyone who asks about the “No Food” policy?  Make it a priority to develop well thought out, informed decisions and **not** knee-jerk policies.

**Number Five:**  There are, of course, common sense exceptions to any rule.  Examples:

**Allergies:**  Maybe little Kellie is allergic to flour.  The reaction is so bad that she cannot touch it.   In this case, we probably won’t be putting flour in the sensory tub this year.  No worries.  I would find something we could use instead though.  What can we find that she *can* touch?  There are plenty of options if we look hard enough.  We need to be willing to find them.  It also means that flour is not okay *this* year.  We must resist the urge to institute a “no more flour *ever*” policy.

**Religious Reasons:**  There are food no-no’s in many faiths.  Be respectful and be prepared!  Having this information *prior* to showing up with activities the following week avoided potential embarrassment and unintentional offenses.

**Cultural Issues:**  I was teaching preschool in a suburban community with middle/upper middle class demographics.  Wondering where the next meal was coming from was not a point of concern.  I had quite a few children from Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean descent in my classroom.   Some of the mothers came to me and said that the children playing with rice was kind of troublesome to them.  The important note here is that *the families came to me* to discuss a concern they were having.  I did not *assume* that because I had Asian children in my program that rice was not okay.  See the difference?  We didn’t have rice in the table that year.  No big deal.  Again though please let me reiterate, rice was not okay *that year*.  This is different than making a new policy that now says rice is not okay *ever.*

**Number Six:**  If you have found that you are most comfortable on the “no food” side of the fence I would challenge you to make sure that you are finding various non-food materials to facilitate tactile and sensorial exploration.  Cornmeal not OK?  Fine, so what other kind of grainy soft substances are you using in the water table tub instead?  *Do not use the policy as an excuse to be lazy!*  Sometimes at workshops there are a few folks who are very quick to say, “We can’t do that,” when I demonstrate something that might have a food material in it.  Nylon splat painting comes to mind.  Instead of them being so quick to shut down the possibility of doing the activity I would rather have them inquire of some substitutes. Could we use sand? Absolutely!   How about dirt?  Sure can!  Some soft gravel bits?  Of course.  You need to be extra creative to make sure you are still providing substances for exploration.  Check out various grains of sand, dirt and rock.  Home and Garden stores are going to be a great resource for you.  Have you tried mulch in the sensory tub?  Have you ever planted grass and then had the kids cut it with scissors??  Be sure that your sensory tub center is not left wanting simply because you have said no to various food materials.

**Number Seven:**  Are you aligned with ECERS or ITERS? If so, you need to read the book a little bit closer. Nowhere in ECERS does it say you can’t use food.  Infact, you get a higher score in your Sand/Water Table rating area if you use materials other than water and sand!  And in ITERS all it says is that you can’t use food for art. So if your evaluator comes in while you have a table full of toddlers finger painting with pudding you call it a sensory experience.  Now hear me out on this, I’m not not not giving you permission to be snarky or rude.  Nor do I want you to get fired! What I am doing is challenging you to actually be familiar with ANY and ALL documents that you are held accountable to.  You have a responsibility to have an in-depth understanding of the policies governing you.  You also have the right to make sure they are really *policies* and not the *personal preferences* of someone who is only on site once a year.  Which leads us to…

**…Number Eight:**  If you have been told that *licensing* says you can’t use food, you have the professional responsibility to be so familiar with your regs that you know if it’s true or not.  Where is that actually stated in the regs?  What page is it on? If you are being told that you can’t use food because of licensing but no one can show you in the regs where it says that, you need to have a conversation with someone and figure out what’s going on.  Are rules being enforced? Or interpreted? There is a difference. Take the time to figure it out.

**Conclusion:**

 Nothing is ever so nice, neat and tidy that it fits in a nice little box.  The topic of using food in the classroom, and please pardon the pun, can be a sticky issue.  Remember that it is okay to change your mind and to change your position. Maybe you currently don’t allow food usage but you think you might want to start exploring it.  Maybe you do use food but for various reasons you are considering a change to the other “no food usage” side of the issue.  Either way my message is simple – **THINK!!!**  Think it through, investigate all sides and beware of knee-jerk reactions.  We want to encourage RE-flection, not RE-action.  When it comes to making changes (food related or otherwise) you must do so only after thinking about it, talking about it and making sure you are aware of the reasons behind the changes.  Constantly asking *why why why!!??* Even changes for the better need to be thought through.

 To be brutally honest, (and I have come to learn that that is what folks like about my style,) I don’t really care if you use food or not.  I do, however, care *deeply* about whether or not you can talk about what you are doing and confidently articulate the reasons why.  Can you have a professional dialogue (not everything has to be a debate) about what led you to adopt your position?  Do you have a full grasp on the rationale behind your choice?  Talking and thinking about things, not just going through the motions, is how we all continue on our journey of being the best that we can be for our children and families.

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