



Children hone their motor skills as they prepare their own meals and clean up afterwards



Involving children in cooking empowers them to be more independent

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

CHILDREN DEVELOP AN APPETITE FOR LEARNING THROUGH MEALTIMES AND CULINARY EXPERIENCES.

At Chatsworth Preschool (Piccadilly Campus), mealtimes are woven into the curriculum. By teacher Ms Farah Aziz's estimation, children possibly spend more than two hours a day on mealtimes. She points out, "This exceeds the time they spend on each curricular area. With all this time spent on meals, should this simply be a routine?"

By involving them in preparing, serving and cleaning up, mealtimes become a pedagogical channel for children to "acquire language, develop numeracy skills, heighten social competence and hone eye-hand coordination", says Ms Farah. She spearheaded the 'Language of Food' project that won the centre an ECDA Early Childhood Innovation Award (Distinction) in 2020.

MAKING MEALTIMES MEANINGFUL

A food pantry was set up in the classroom, with tabletop space for food preparation, a storage system for kitchen utensils and a cleaning station with a mobile sink, all designed to be easily accessible for toddlers. Teachers attended training courses to learn about food content, nutritional value and the

art of plating, in order to involve and engage children.

Lunch became a time for socialisation and conversation. Children were encouraged to converse with one another while waiting to be served. Menu options allowed them to make independent choices. Food leaders were appointed to take note of their classmates' menu preferences and relay the information to the teachers.

Outside mealtimes, children were encouraged to express their ideas about food through discussions and writing. They voted on the food they liked, made recipe cards, reviewed the menus and shared experiences through show-and-tell sessions.

Meal preparation and after-meal clean-up offered opportunities for them to practise their motor skills. They were exposed to kitchen tools

“ In class, I learnt to be responsible for cooking and cleaning on my own. I like to make things for myself. My favourite is pancakes. It is fun to help in the kitchen. ”

ADAM LIM, 4

like the pestle and mortar. After meals, they washed their own plates and utensils.

"As active participants in their mealtime experience, children were able to create, express themselves, and make connections from the farm to table," observes Ms Farah. "This experience is empowering and it translates into children developing a sense of agency, confidence and responsibility."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This project affirmed the educators' image of toddlers as capable learners. "It made us think about the curriculum opportunities in routine care. For a start, we want to have a version of a kitchen in every class for every child so that explorations and learning about food are embedded in their daily lives," adds Ms Farah.

On that note, the centre intends to establish 'Language of Food' as a progressive curriculum as children advance through the levels. It will start with the playgroups exploring the taste, shapes and colours of fruits from the preschool garden; pre-nursery learning to prepare their own snacks; nursery growing herbs and vegetables; K1 creating recipes; and K2 making snacks to feed other levels. ●



HARVESTING THE BENEFITS

WORKING IN THE PRESCHOOL GARDEN HELPED CHILDREN GAIN CONFIDENCE IN THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY WHILE LEARNING TO CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT.



Children measuring the papayas they grew in their preschool garden

It was the children who planted the idea of creating a garden for NTUC First Campus' My First Skool at Blk 203D Compassvale Road. While on their regular outdoor walks, the teachers observed how much children enjoyed interacting with the gardeners and exploring the green plot at the nearby Compassvale Southgate Community Garden.

The centre tapped on the ECDA Innovation Projects Grant for funding support to set up its own garden. Together with the children, the teachers researched into sustainable gardening and purchased a simple irrigation system powered by solar energy to water the garden. Plants were marked with labels printed with QR codes, which children could scan to get more information about the



Scanning a QR code to find out more about pumpkins

species and origin of each plant variety. The flexibility of QR codes allowed teachers to curate and update the content regularly. This project earned the centre an ECDA Early Childhood Innovation Award (Distinction) in 2020.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

The centre sought advice from NParks and the gardeners who tend the Compassvale Southgate Community Garden. Parents were also roped in as volunteers.

Ms Inggawati, the centre's English Lead Teacher, says, "Together with the community gardeners, parents helped us by contributing recycled materials like vehicle tyres and plastic bottles, scrapped toilet doors for garden panels and fences, and physical labour to dig the ground and install the fences. It was a community effort!"

FRUITS OF THEIR LABOUR

Ms Inggawati shares the manifold ways in which children blossomed. They practised their motor and body coordination skills as they raked the soil, picked up seeds and plucked the leaves. Their literacy and numeracy skills also improved

“ My favourite activity in the garden is learning about the plants. When Mummy and Daddy ask me the names, I can answer because I know which is pumpkin and kangkong. ”

JONAS TAN, 5

as they discussed the gardening experiences. The children had opportunities to think critically and problem-solve through questions about the vegetables planted, and the mechanics of the irrigation system and solar panels.

As the children weeded, watered and nurtured the garden, the teachers could see that they were learning to show a greater appreciation for nature and awareness of the environment. They also brought home the fruits of their labour. "Parents told us that their children enjoyed eating kangkong harvested from the garden, compared to the ones from the supermarket," adds Ms Inggawati.

Working on this project has also shaped her perception of children as active, confident learners who are born curious. "They are always interested to learn new concepts, and they adapt easily to innovative approaches and the use of technology. Teachers play an important role as facilitators," she observes. ●

TAKE ROOT AND GROW

The centre plans to scale up the garden and plant more crop varieties. It has also purchased a composter and fertiliser machine to promote sustainability. Children will learn how food waste is turned into organic fertiliser and share this resource with the community gardeners who inspired their project.

