

You are what you eat:

How culture and traditions shape our food choices

BACKGROUNDER FOR EDUCATORS

Much of the knowledge and practices that inform cooking and eating are shared through cultural and family traditions. Traditions can influence how and when food is prepared, which foods are selected, the emotional connection to certain meals, and our personal and cultural identities. Research has shown that cooking skills—such as transforming raw ingredients into complete, culturally appropriate, and nutritious meals—are often transferred by observing parents cooking within the home environment. Furthermore, as families move away from traditional cooking and food preparation methods towards pre-prepared foods, this skill transfer is reduced.^{xxii} In many cultures, food and eating are valued as major social activities, community bonding practices and celebrations.^{xxiii}



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Kids will learn more from their elders and peers about what food means to them, along with the culture and traditions surrounding food in their families.



SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED

- Markers/pencils/crayons/pens
- Large sheets of paper (Mural size)
- **My Food Memory, Family Food Tradition Interview, circle diagram.**



SAMPLE TIMING AND FLOW

- 10 min My Food Memory
- 10 min Learning from Parents and Elders
- 15 min Food in the Family
- 35 min Meal Preparation
- 15 min Food Traditions Mural
Can be done during cooking time following food preparation
- 20 min Garden Activity
- 10 min Meal Sharing
- 5 min Clean-up

Before: In the previous session, hand out Sharing Food Traditions questionnaire. Tell kids that they are to be detectives! They must find an older person in their life and ask them this series of questions about what their relationship to food was like when they were young.

ACTIVITIES

MY FOOD MEMORY

Pass around the **My Food Memory sheets** and ask kids to draw a picture or write a description of a memorable moment in their lives where food was involved. Who was there? What was the occasion? What food was being made, or eaten? What were colours, flavours, smells?

When everyone is finished, ask: Would anyone like to share their food memory with the group? Are you noticing any similarities between the different memories?

Explain that in today's session, we are going to look at food traditions and how our culture shapes how we interact with food.

Ask: Does anyone have any food traditions in their families?

Some of these rituals, or patterns, are things we do every day, such as a snack before bedtime, a certain treat for recess, or pancakes on the weekend. Other rituals we have are so automatic we don't even realize we're doing them, like certain meal times, table manners, setting the table, and grocery shopping.

Ask: When you think about supper-time, are there rituals or patterns that take place every day? What are they?

Food traditions and rituals go beyond our everyday. Food reminds us of our pasts, like family recipes and customs that have been passed down through generations. Food events play an important role in bringing us together and in celebrations. Events like Christmas dinner, an Indian wedding, Chinese New Year, all have particular foods associated with them.

Things never stay the same forever, and we are seeing many food traditions changing, too. For example foods from other cultures, such as sushi and tacos, have become increasingly popular. Some families might have a taco or sushi night now, whereas in the past they would have had chicken and potatoes.

Ask: Have you noticed any "new" food traditions appearing?

SHARING FOOD TRADITIONS, LEARNING FROM PARENTS AND ELDERS

This is a sharing activity, to review what kids found out from their Elders during the **Sharing Food Traditions questionnaire**. This sharing activity can be done between pairs or, for more rambunctious groups, try this version. For each question, have kids circulate in the group, surveying others and finding others with similar answers to their own. Keep track of the number of similar answers.

Open it up to a group discussion (if you started with partners or the game). If the group did not discover many differences, then ask them what kind of differences would exist if they were able to ask these questions of a family member who lived a hundred years ago. Write these differences down so all can see; we'll use them later.

FOOD IN THE FAMILY

Break participants up into pairs and pass out the **Family Food Tradition Interview sheets**, which they'll use to interview their partners. Have them discuss the questions together and write their answers on the paper within a **circle diagram**. The middle will show what traditions they both share, with their own traditions on each side. Explain to participants the importance of being respectful of other people and their cultures/rituals. Ask everyone to return to the circle and encourage pairs to share any interesting similarities or differences they found. What are the reasons for these similarities or differences?

FOOD TRADITIONS MURAL

Using a marker, divide a large piece of paper (e.g., mural paper) into two sections: "Then" and "Now". Set out colouring tools and encourage kids to draw a picture of something that has changed between "Then" and "Now." Use your list from the "Learning from Parents and Elders" activity to give the group ideas. Think about differences in what we eat and how we eat it. Consider differences in where our food is coming from.

This is a useful activity to fill the gaps while waiting for food to cook and a fun way to review the conversations from the day. For example, one participant drew a family sitting around a table in "Then" and a person eating sitting in front of a TV for "Now." Another participant drew an apple below "Then" and an orange and banana below "Now."



EXTRA RESOURCES

- The British Library has a collection of **food stories** that highlight changes in eating habits.
- The Ecology Action Centre has step-by-step **Canning** and **Fermenting** Toolkits. Recipes included!



RECIPE SUGGESTIONS

Select recipes that highlight a cultural tradition of those in your group or perhaps something new from another culture! Think stuffed turkey, vegetable curry or chicken fajita or try preserving food through canning or fermenting!



SUGGESTED GARDEN ACTIVITY

If it's late summer or fall, then connect the theme of traditions by trying a seed saving activity. Although most people buy their seeds these days, in the past, people depended on saving their own seeds to be able to grow food the following season.



FOOD FUN FOR ALL!

Celebrate diversity. Highlight and celebrate the different cultures and food traditions in your group. For many kids, being different may bring unwanted attention, so avoid singling participants out if they don't volunteer. In groups where there may be less cultural diversity, consider inviting a special guest to share their culture and a recipe.