



# eARTICLE

## FOOD IN THE INFANT COMMUNITY

**This Q&A from an AMI Communications looks at the importance and role of food in the Montessori Infant Community**

Maria Montessori said in *The Discovery of the Child* 'When the children are invited to dinner, they do not simply eat but are delighted by this fine opportunity to exercise their inner powers and higher aspirations.' This statement underlines the importance and role of food.

The question of the role of food in a Montessori environment really deserves an answer in two instalments: one dealing with children from birth to three, and a second one to deal with aspects of food in the 3-6 and 6-12 environment combined.

To start off with the 0-3 environment, during the September 2003 conference in Sydney, with the overall theme "The Child as Builder of Humanity", AMI trainer Judith Orion gave a lecture on food, touching upon many facets: cultural, social and practical. We thank her for allowing us to present here a condensed version of her talk.

### The Sharing of Food

Through the sharing of food we have the opportunity to participate in and pass on social and cultural values, and customs. Food can also be used as a way of nurturing ourselves. This stems from our infancy, where food was synonymous with mother, ideally synonymous with nurturing.

However, we must disassociate food from our own emotional attitudes if we are to deal with food objectively in the Infant Community, where food is used as a vehicle for education. When providing meals, we sometimes find it necessary to educate the parents. Not only do we stress the importance of nutrition, but we also emphasise the need for children to observe food being prepared with love. Parents need to be informed about growth spurts and how that impacts the child's appetite. Although parents will provide enough food for the appetite of a child in a growth spurt, they sometimes expect that appetite to continue once the growth spurt is over.



**Montessori Australia**

02 9986 2282

[info@montessori.org.au](mailto:info@montessori.org.au)

[www.montessori.org.au](http://www.montessori.org.au)

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In the 1909 edition of *The Montessori Method*, Maria Montessori wrote, 'While it is necessary to give good food to the child, it still must be an educative action.' In many Montessori classes - whether at the 0-3 level, the 3-6 or 6-12 level - food is prepared by the classroom assistant and put out for the children to have snack.

### Preparation of Food with Toddlers

After many years of experience of preparing food with toddlers, it is clear to us that:

1. Children can do these activities if the activities are prepared following the guidelines used for creating all practical life exercises;
2. The exercises are done collaboratively in the beginning;
3. Children need these exercises, as today many children don't have the opportunities to do these activities at home.

Children in these first three years of life must:

- come to know their reality;
- coordinate their movements around their reality;
- master the language associated with their reality.

Activities related to the preparation, serving and sharing of food can prepare a young child in all these areas. Knowing their reality can be as simple as knowing a watermelon as the whole fruit. Often we give only little bits of reality e.g., we give them little cut-up pieces of fruit. We should rather give children the whole picture. There are few children under three who get to see food in its raw state. The whole picture includes preparing

food from its raw state, setting the table (not coming to a table already set), serving food, eating, and cleaning up. Children come to master their reality by working on it, e.g., by preparing food, setting the table, finding appropriate dishes in the cupboard, folding napkins in various ways, etc.

All the activities involved in coming to know one's reality involve movement, and these activities call for and aid in the development of coordinated, refined movement. For instance, the child learns:

- how to hold a knife to cut bananas, cheese, tofu;
- how to move the hands to fold a napkin into a square versus rolling the napkin into a tube and placing it into a glass;
- how to follow the stitched pattern on a tablecloth to lay the table;
- how to carry dishes, glasses in a way that eliminates dropping them; and
- how to unfold a prefolded tablecloth that allows it to lie upon a table without needing to be turned over.

### Language

Imagine the language development that can result from all these activities. Every utensil has a name; every action has a name. What better way to give a child a clear foundation for language than these activities? How clearer the words will be if the names given are related to real objects, real activities rather than a set of object cards, a set of activity cards. The possibilities for language development are almost limitless-if we take advantage of them.





## Mathematical Concepts

These activities also give children a great foundation for some basic math concepts: one-to-one correspondence, some rudimentary concept of time, the value of zero as a placeholder, etc. Setting the table, for instance, easily teaches one-to-one correspondence: 'One plate for Susanna, one plate for Anthony, one plate for Devin.' Or, 'The muffins need to bake for 15 minutes. Let's set a timer for 15 minutes.' I once observed a small girl of about 20 months who had helped in the bread baking every day for almost 2 months. She had internalised the time of one hour and would anticipate by about two minutes the buzzing of the onehour timer each time it was set.

## Social Development

These activities also give the possibility of most naturally aiding the building of a child's self-esteem, self-reliance, and selfconfidence. When eating the bread that has been baking during morning, an adult only needs to say, 'Who made this wonderful bread? Thank you so much as it is really delicious.' The child's self-esteem comes then from their contribution to the social group, not from empty comments and praises. Children gain opportunities for social development, as dining becomes a communal experience. They absorb the social rituals and courtesies surrounding food in their society.

When we consider the types of activities related to food in an infant community, we have activities that the adult must do and activities in which the children can participate in or carry out independently.



## Creating Menus

Our menus are governed by the food to be served—snack, lunch or both. In situations where children stay more than three hours daily, a monthly menu for snacks and lunches must be posted. Ideally, the teacher should be involved in the creation of these menus. This is where our knowledge of good nutrition comes in to play. We must provide for nutritionally balanced, wholesome snacks and/or lunches, keeping in mind what young children enjoy eating and the preparation involved.

## Serving Food

The adult must decide how food is to be served. If it is communal food, small serving dishes and serving utensils must be found. Children are then taught the proper way to serve themselves "one spoonful" at a time, how to pass the serving dish, etc. When food is brought from home, we need to decide on how it is to be served. Perhaps a cart can be used on which all the food for the children of one table (5 or 6 children) is placed, so that it is readily available.

## Eating Together

As in all other activities in the environment, the adults must follow the socially accepted customs around food. For children in the Infant Community this is the way of teaching grace and courtesy. Therefore, the adults must eat with the children. How better to teach the use of the napkin? How better to teach how not to talk with food in the mouth? How better to role-model taking one spoonful at a time, thereby not wasting food? All the cultural mores around food are modelled when the adults eat with the children.

When planning the dining area, it is ideal to have separate dining tables and chairs.

When this is not possible, either economically or space-wise, the worktables and chairs are put together to create a dining area. Ideally, each table (or group of tables) would serve half of the children in the group, each half sitting with one adult. Nearby each table is a small cart on which one finds every thing needed for the meal: the larger pitcher of milk or lemon water, extra food, the shibori (small wet, rolled wash cloths used for the first stage of clean up). This small cart eliminates the necessity of the adult getting up and down throughout the meal (and setting that as the model for meal-time!). By sitting with the children, we provide an example of the appropriate conversation for meal-times. We can offer aid as needed, and we can supervise more closely the activity of the children.

[From AMI Communications 2004/1 p.39-42]

## Cleaning Up

This is often the most stressful of the activities. Children are often tired by this time.

When very tired, their newly acquired motor skills diminish into helplessness. We must time things so that there is a greater possibility of not pushing the children too long before eating. The adult can pass the basket of shibori (from the cart) asking each child to take one and wipe its hands. The child can then, with relatively clean hands, get up, push their chair in, and carry, one-at-a-time, their dirty dishes to the dirty dish cart. There needs to be a compost bucket nearby with a small spatula for scraping any uneaten food. The dirty dish cart has at least three levels, each clearly marked with a stitched cloth or marked cardboard indicating what type of dishes belong on that particular shelf. Once children have made all the trips to and from the dirty dish cart and their place is clean, they go into the bathroom for further clean up, toileting, etc.

