

More Than Just Cookery: Home Economics for Special Needs

Education for living is an essential component of any special needs curriculum. Properly planned and implemented, a home economics programme not only provides homemaking skills but can be used effectively as a means of reinforcing wider curricular learning in a integrated way.

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Pupils with special needs can benefit greatly from Home Economics since it is a subject that can, with careful planning, be presented at levels suited to their varying needs and abilities. Home Economics lessons offer excellent and practical opportunities for the reinforcement and development of language, reading and number.

The very nature of a Home Economics programme ensures that pupils who study it develop:

1. Skills which enable them to look after themselves and their immediate surroundings and so lessen their dependence on family, community and state.
2. Good methodical working habits which can spill over into all other working situations.
3. An ability to make choices and decisions.
4. Self reliance and independence.

These skills would be of particular benefit to pupils in Special Education.

Home Economics in the Curriculum.

Home Economics embraces all three domains of learning objectives to some degree. The study of nutrition is closely associated with cognitive learning; human development and family relationship with the affective domain, and food preparation, clothing construction and craft work with psychomotor development.

All three should be considered when planning for teaching each home economics subject area, although for each content area one domain may be emphasized more than others. Home Economics activities can be enjoyable when even the most backward pupil can achieve some degree of success. This can help develop a positive attitude towards self and a self concept that will bring out the finest in the pupil. The under achiever, with a history of failure in the academic area very often is successful in the Home Economics area and blossoms in creating something tangible whether in cookery, craft or sewing class.

The Role of Play Learning.

Primary education aims to develop within the learner competence in speaking, reading, writing, number and socialization. Additional elements normally associated with Home Economics may be included to supplement, strengthen and enrich this learning. It falls therefore to the class teacher to introduce these elements when it is thought that pupils are ready. This can begin at a junior stage and may be introduced as play learning. Sand, play-doh and water may be used. Initially pupils explore the new material and experiment with it, using it for different purposes and in different situations. Practice with given material leads to ability to control it in some form of creative work. Working with a malleable substance like play-doh gives many opportunities for manipulation. The young child can roll it to make snakes, sausages or sweets. It can be coloured with vegetable colouring or left plain. It can be rolled and cut into shapes, baked and made into brooches. The end product will depend on the age and ability of the child. Children who miss out on this stage of development have an adverse reaction to handling bread dough in a practical cookery class later on in their schooling. They either regard it as dirty or over handle it to the detriment of the dough.

Extending the Learning Process.

Proper nutrition and a well balanced diet is vital for a healthy lifestyle and this can be fostered and encouraged in a food preparation or cookery class. This can be introduced by studying the qualities of natural foods such as fruit, vegetables or nuts. A trip to the supermarket or shop could be taken at this stage and a full programme of consumer education could be incorporated into the lesson.

The layout of the shop or supermarket could be studied, the various labels on specific packages and what information they impart, how fresh foods are arranged together in either shelves or display areas, where frozen and preserved foods may be obtained and much much more. On return to the classroom, purchases can be costed, drawn and recorded and this multi-activity project can extend the learning experience beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

Introducing Home Economics to the Curriculum.

With very young children, food preparation classes that don't involve cooking are ideal. The programme can begin with non cooking activities like buttering bread, making sandwiches, spreading savoury fillings on open rolls, peeling fruit, washing and peeling vegetables, measuring liquid using cup or measuring jug, measuring solids using teaspoon and tablespoon. Quick tasty snacks that are healthy, colourful, nutritious with easily obtained ingredients can stimulate and maintain interest in the lesson.

An older class group could use an apple or other fruit as a basic theme to begin with. It could be tasted raw and notes taken of appearance, smell, taste and texture. Application of heat and moisture bring about changes in these foods. These experiments lead into discussion of methods of cooking and food preparation. The fruit can be cooked dry as in

baked apple, cooked with water as in stewed apple. Food value, characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of each method of cooking can be discussed. Milk and milk products, fish, eggs and meat can follow fruit and vegetables as tastes to be sampled. The use of an egg could be another suitable introductory theme. It can be used raw as in egg flip, boiled, scrambled, fried, used to make omelet, etc. This could lead into discussion on breakfast and its importance in the diet. Many other breakfast foods like citrus fruits, muesli and porridge can be introduced and the pupils encouraged to improve their eating habits and select foods which make up a balanced meal. They could identify the four food groups as:

- (a) The fruit and vegetable group.
- (b) The bread and cereal group.
- (c) The milk and cheese group.
- (d) The meat, poultry and fish group.

and learn that the ideal breakfast consists of a portion of three of the four food groups each day. By allowing them to make choices and express preferences the lesson could be more meaningful as they are personally involved in the learning process. This could be the beginning of healthy eating habits which could last all their lives.

Home Economics as a Core Facilitator.

The cookery lesson gives multi sensory training - seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, are all practised in natural surroundings

- hear the water bubbling in the pot
- feel the texture of the uncooked dough or pastry
- taste the cooking apple
- smell the lemon or orange.

It can promote language development by giving opportunities for expressing likes and dislikes. Every activity in which the child participates should be utilized for the development of his receptive and expressive language. Doing things by hand is so much more effective for understanding of language than looking at pictures and pronouncing the words. In the cookery lesson there is an excellent opportunity to let pupils see, handle and create the concrete object. It is very easy to overestimate the pupil's ability to consider the two dimensional picture as representing the three dimensional reality.

Language development with young children is more successful when shared with others, e.g. children and teacher.

Because *concepts* are founded on experience, a cookery lesson gives ample opportunity for building and extending these beginning with *pre-mathematical concepts*. Pupils in Special Education have difficulties in understanding concepts of quantitative thinking - it is much easier to see the difference between "bigger than" and "smaller than" when referring to edible things, e.g.

A cooking apple is bigger than an eating apple.

A lemon is smaller than a grapefruit.

A potato is heavier than an egg.

A cup of coconut or flakemeal is lighter than a cup of sugar.

Time concepts can also be incorporated into the lesson, e.g.:

Cook first, set the table later.

Length of time required to cook dishes.

Spatial Relationships are necessary to find your bearings in life and lessons in these are freely available in the cookery programme, e.g.

The biscuits are placed in the top of the oven,
the baked apple in the bottom.

The spices are high up in the cupboard, the
flour low down.

One pot is standing in front, another behind it.

There are many more such instances.

Weighing and *measuring* are essential in the preparation of ingredients for cooking.

Importance of *sequence* is highlighted in a cookery lesson as correct order of method is essential for satisfactory results.

Cause and *effect* can also be illustrated in a practical way, e.g. when heat is applied to water in a container, the water boils. Knowing the consequence of certain behaviour and being able to predict what will happen are much more meaningful with practical material, e.g.

A tray of scones will change colour, size
shape and texture when placed in a hot oven
to bake.

Co-ordination between hand, eye and motor skills increases each time a pupil chops, stirs, spreads, cuts, kneads. Many of these skills occur naturally in a practical cookery lesson. Variety in the basic materials is important, not only as a means of developing muscular co-ordination, but also in widening language usage and giving a child experience of different activities and materials. Time should be allotted to permit activities to be repeated many times so that the discovery of what "always happens" or "sometimes happens" can be made.

Working as a group, learning by doing, experiencing working close together, all help towards better peer relationships. Pupils learn from and about other pupils in the group. They have to share, take turns and co-operate in joint efforts and this can be the beginning of social education. To know and anticipate their own actions and the actions of others in a given situation can develop into ability to control both feelings and actions.

Home Economics can broaden the scope of the general curriculum and provide opportunities for a varied education and training in a natural and stimulating environment. The subject can also be used effectively as a tool for integrated learning by reinforcing in a practical way, the skills acquired in the classroom.

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