
The Pedagogical Importance of Nutrition

— Laurie Clark

“To have good taste” is a metaphor that describes a human capacity that can be applied to all areas of life — artistic, philosophical and practical. It is important that children learn to taste well. Children who have learned to taste nutrients well, they may also in other situations have a sense for the quality of a situation, because they have learned to perceive the “inner side” of things.

*~ from Chapter 3 of
The First Seven Years:
Physiology of Childhood
by Edmond Schoorel*

When we look at the origin and the meaning of words, we can find the hidden significance that the word holds. The word “nutrition” comes from the Latin “nutritio,” meaning “to nourish.” The word “nourish” comes from “nutrire,” also Latin, meaning “to cherish.” When we provide good and thoughtful nutrition for a child, we are cherishing their very existence.

What does it mean to be conscious of the nutrition that we provide? How can we best serve the children of our times with the food we offer?

The toddler takes food into her mouth — and everything else too, including toys, dirt and rocks. She *tastes* whatever she wishes to understand. The world becomes known to the toddler through the sense of taste.

There are many children in our care that have limited food choices, sensitivities in the mouth to textures, allergies, eating disorders, and extreme sensitivities to smell. What happened between the toddler phase, when everything went into the mouth in order to “taste the world” and a few years later? For many children, the gate to putting food into the mouth is locked and limited to what it will allow in. How can we as teachers help to find the key that unlocks this gate?

One way to explore this phenomenon is to look through the lens of the twelve senses as described by Rudolf Steiner. An understanding of these senses helps to pave the way towards thoughtful guidance for the children in our care.

The four foundational senses are touch, self-movement, balance, and the sense of life. These senses give us a relationship to our body and, when integrated, help us to feel “at home” and secure in ourselves. In order to feel nourished, a sense of safety needs to be established. When these foundational senses are fully integrated, it provides the grounding for a child to experience a true shelter within herself. This kind of security helps to nurture the ability to take in the world with confidence. For children who are hesitant to move into their bodies, taking in unfamiliar food can be exceedingly uncomfortable.

The four higher senses are the sense of thought, hearing, word, and the sense of the I or ego. These higher senses, or social senses as they are often called, when developed give us the opportunity to relate in a conscious and mindful way to other people and to the surrounding world. When the foundational senses are healthy and assimilated, they can provide a bridge to freely develop these higher senses as an individual matures. An example of this connection would be how the foundational sense of balance carries the transformational capacity to cultivate the social sense of hearing. When we want to deeply understand what another individual is saying to us,

we need to stay balanced in our own soul life in order to truly listen. We might say, “I hear you,” meaning, not just a physical hearing through the ear but that we have remained balanced in ourselves so that we can truly understand what the other person is trying to impart to us.

Sharing a meal together and practicing table manners as a class community is a step towards these social graces. It is important for the children to have the experience that we are all sharing the meal together with the same foods.

The four middle senses are warmth, sight, taste and smell. These senses provide individual, personal experiences that give us the opportunity to experience the self in relation to the environment and the environment in relation to the self.

Warmth is a mysterious sense. It balances the feeling of warmth and cold inside and outside of our body. To keep the child warm is essential in early childhood to protect her life forces. To give a child warm, delicious food provides an inner sense of comfort.

Warmth is also an inner sense. The center of circulation is in the heart, which gives us the sense of feeling and emotion and provides the warmth that establishes the balance between our inner nature and the surrounding world. The warmth that the teacher enkindles in her heart for the child is essential for the child to feel nourished and cherished.

Steiner speaks of something that he calls cosmic nutrition. Being fed involves both the spirit and the body; it is a communion between the heavens (Father Sun) and the earth (Mother Earth). When the teacher feels deep gratitude for the beauty of the apple she is serving the children and engenders an inner warmth for what nature offers, the finest sustenance for the children is provided and enhances the food we serve them. The verses that we sing before we eat, when said with authentic appreciation, are also a nutritious element and bring a feeling of true warmth and healthy relationship towards the food.

The sense of sight is described by Karl König in his book, *A Living Physiology*. He states in Chapter 3, “Through the opening of our eyes, the world in all its glory appears to us. It opens up the light

through which we feel ourselves established here on earth.” The presentation of the food that we serve the children is important. Setting the table with care and making it look beautiful and organized is a delight to the eye. The various colors of the fruits and vegetables put into a lovely pattern in the bowl attract the child to the food we serve. When we cut an apple so that the star in the center reveals itself, a sense of awe arises. Soup that is served in lovely bowls with noodles of various shapes and vegetables cut into small “fairy bites” entices the child to dip his spoon in and taste it.

The organs of taste and smell are right in the center of our face. Smell comes to us through the air and water elements and carries a message about what is coming towards us from the outside world to our inner world.

“A smell can induce a tidal wave of memories. We are never able to remember smells, but as soon as we smell it again, we recognize it immediately,” Karl König wrote (*ibid.*).

The presence of good cooking smells in the classroom helps to open the gateway to eating. The sense of smell is interwoven with the sense of taste. Aromatic foods like basmati rice, pancakes on the griddle, or bread baking, and the smell of delicious soup cooking all entice the taste buds. Various fruit teas that are served with honey when the children enter the classroom are first smelled and then tasted to guess and distinguish which flavor is being served. One of the favorite Celestial Seasoning herbal teas that is available during the winter months that is served in our classroom is called, Sugar Cookie Sleigh Ride Tea. The name of the tea, as well as the smell of sweet cookies it engenders, gives us a delightful start to our cold winter mornings.

The smell of the foods that are prepared for various festivals create feelings that awaken the remembrance of the celebration. The smell of latkes cooking for Hanukkah, the apples cooking with cinnamon in the autumn for the Harvest Festival, and the baking of birthday cakes awaken warm memories. Herbs such as chamomile and lavender can be added to beanbags, small pillows and other toys that the children play with in the classroom to further cultivate the sense of smell.

When we give children many opportunities for smell, there is a transformative element that can mature in the soul life. As Edmond Schoorel tells us in Chapter 4 of *The First Seven Years*, “They have to learn to trust their nose, and to distinguish all kinds of odors. Later on in life this helps the child to ‘have a nose for things.’ This expression refers to the capacity to know about inner qualities of people or situations with ‘instinctive’ certainty.”

When we feel something is not quite right with a situation, we might say, “I smell something fishy.” When something goes very wrong, we say, “This is hard to swallow.” A remind ourselves to remember the positive aspects of life by saying, “Don’t forget to stop and smell the roses.”

The sense of taste is a huge threshold to cross. Food comes from the outside world directly into the body. Taking substances from the earth straight into the body is an intimate and formative experience. When children are able to practice taking in various tastes, it enhances the possibility of expanding their boundaries and refines their relationship to the world around them. Giving tiny bits of food consistently in “ant portions” can help a child not feel too overwhelmed when trying new foods. Of course, we must take into consideration the children who have allergies to particular foods and plan our menus accordingly.

Planning snack time early enough in the morning gives the body a sturdy foundation. Some children eat little or no breakfast and are hungry soon after

arriving at school. Serving a full protein with each snack regulates moods by stabilizing the blood sugar. Adding a protein (cheese, seeds, nuts, or whole milk yogurt) to the various grains that are served adds energy to provide solidity throughout the morning. Offering alternate protein sources to children with allergies is essential.

Through the senses, children digest the world and their relationship to it. Finding the key to unlock the gate to eating involves innovative and creative solutions. When we invite the children in our care to bring the earthly gift of food into their body, it gives them a sense of well-being and builds confidence in their entrance into life. ♦

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Resources:

- *Karl König, A Living Physiology: Lectures and Essays.* (Botton Village, UK: Camphill Books, 2006)
- *Edmond Schoorel, The First Seven Years: Physiology of Childhood.* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2004)