

# Early Childhood Education

## Video 11: Snack Time

**Category:** Early Childhood Language/Literacy

**Grade Band:** Ages 3 to 5

**Topic:** Daily Activities

**Concepts:** Receptive/Expressive Language and Vocabulary Development

**Context:** Young children learn early language and mathematical skills best in natural environments, such as daily routines and play. Something as simple as preparing and eating a snack together offers opportunities to promote language and math skills. Snack and mealtime occur frequently throughout the day. With some good modeling of language and some intentional invitations to invite children to think and talk, parents can promote early learning of language in fun and meaningful ways and help children be better prepared for more formal literacy and mathematical learning when they start school. Parents' encouragement of and enthusiasm for discussion will instill a love of learning that will follow their children as they proceed through school.

**Rational:** The National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that 37% of U.S. fourth graders fail to meet basic levels of reading achievement (*The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, 2008*). Young children vary greatly in their basic language/literacy skills as they enter school. Those children that possess strong language and basic emergent literacy skills will be better prepared to learn to read. Strong language and vocabulary development will build a foundation on which more expanded literacy skills will be built as children proceed through the early grades. When parents model and intentionally engage their children in conversation, children learn and expand their language and vocabulary in their natural environments.

National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) provided a research synthesis on early literacy that includes writing and spelling development as well as reading. Limitations – it uses only studies reporting empirical research, a requirement of the NRC under NCLB. They found 11 variables qualify as predictors with sufficient correlation to literacy: alphabetic knowledge, print knowledge, environmental print, invented spelling, listening comprehension, oral language/vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonological short-term memory, and visual perceptual skills.

### **Opportunities for building receptive/expressive language and vocabulary**

- I. Talking and listening is a great way to develop the important **social/emotional skill of attachment**. Young children learn about

building relationships by experiencing positive, trusting relationships with their families. As parents engage their children in thinking and speaking, children develop important knowledge and skill about interacting in social situations.

- II. Young children learn many things about how **language is used effectively** such as turn taking, intonation, eye contact, and enjoyment of verbal interaction, by listening and talking with adults;
- III. Children learn more expanded **sentence structure** by listening and talking with adults. Adults can support developing language by modeling and extending verbal responses. A young child may say, “Cracker” and adults can add to that response by saying, “Oh, do you want a cracker? We have some animal crackers today.”
- IV. Children need to develop their **vocabulary** skills continuously. Children with strong vocabulary skills have an easier time learning to read. Preparing and eating snacks provide opportunities for children to be exposed to new words. Different names of fruits and vegetables (i.e. pineapple, clementine, celery, melon, etc), different cookie types, names of cereals, and varieties of beverages are all talking points that will give opportunities to extend young children’s vocabulary. Children need to hear new words over and over before they can remember them and eventually use them in their own speech.

In addition to *names* of foods, snack time can be used to expose children to a variety of action and descriptive words. Words like “slice”, “spread”, “measure”, “share”, “carefully”, “delicious”, “fresh”, “smooth”, “perfect”, and “healthy” can be introduced and used in meaningful conversations and experiences.

- V. Most foods, including fresh produce, have labels of some sort. Parents can point to labels (i.e. “This says Cheerios.”) Making children **aware of print** teaches young children that print carries meaning and that words we say can be represented by text. We are not teaching young children to read, but preparing them for the important concept that print carries meaning. Just drawing attention to *important print* helps children develop an interest in printed words.
- VI. **Alphabet knowledge** has been shown to be a predictor of reading success when children enter kindergarten. Some researchers say alphabetic knowledge is a byproduct of rich early literacy experiences, not a result of training children to memorize letters out of context (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Parents can reinforce letter connections, before asking children to identify letters on their own. Children will be able to label letters later on, after they have had multiple exposures. Reinforcing letter knowledge in the natural environment is the best way to teach young children about letters. Young children learn to recognize the alphabet letters of their names in the early preschool years, instead of using flashcards. We can draw attention to common letters

contained on snack labels to help reinforce letter knowledge (“Look, cheese start with a “c”. You have a “c” in your name, too”).

- VII. Inviting children to engage in conversation** will help children strengthen their language skills. Parents can invite children to talk in different ways. One way is to ask questions. When you ask your children questions, you are sending the message that you want to talk *with* them. Parents can ask “yes/no”, “wh”, and “open-ended questions. Yes/no questions are the easiest to answer, wh questions (what, where, who, when) involve a little more thinking. Open ended questions invite more thinking and, usually, involve a longer response. Open-ended questions typically start with: Why do you think....., what might happen if we....., How could we.....? Follow your child’s lead. A mix of question types will keep the conversation going. Try not to “quiz” your child. Have fun. Find out your child’s thoughts. You know best what your child is interested in.

## Mathematics Connections

I. There are many snack items that can be counted (i.e. crackers, cookies, apple slices, banana slices, cereal pieces, cheese slices, raisins, etc.) You don’t need to count everything, but young children enjoy **counting** in meaningful situations. A parent might ask, “Do you want two crackers or four crackers? Did I get you the right amount?” Let’s see how many slices we can cut from this banana.” There are endless possibilities!

You can also help children learn to “count on”. This is a good foundation for later addition and subtraction of numbers. Place one piece of snack on some but not all of the plates. Ask the child, “How many more crackers do we need so each plate has one cracker?”

II. Parents can help children **compare** size and quantity of snack items. “We have *one whole* apple. I am going to cut it into *two halves*. I can see that a half apple is smaller than a whole apple.” “If I take this piece and you take this piece, who has the *bigger piece*?” Children can learn other comparative words like long, longer, and longest. Children will not only enjoy a healthy snack, they will learn to look forward to their conversations with you. Make it fun. Don’t ask too many questions. Often your comments are enough to get kids thinking.

Is this (the highlighted sentence) connected to the apple halves? If so, I think it should be changed. To tell a child that half an apple is smaller than the whole is okay, but then to ask which piece (half) is bigger is deceptive. Real “halves” are equal. One suggestion: Change this to something else. For example, use grapes and have the children compare which grape is bigger, smaller, etc.

III. You can talk about **shapes**. A square piece of cheese can be cut into two triangles. A cube of cheese offers a 3-dimensional model. Other opportunities – a can of fruit is a cylinder, an ice-cream cone is a cone, a green grape is an ellipse, a globe grape is a sphere as is an orange, An apple can be cut different ways to make different shapes (from top to bottom or across the center). Shapes are apparent in many snack items. Draw attention to these shapes and eventually children will begin to see these shapes on their own.

IV. Textures and tastes: sweet, salty, bitter, chewy, sticky, stringy, crunchy, rubbery, crispy, soft

V. What food does – melt, harden, soften, stale, fresh, freeze, thaw...

IV. Even more math is involved if children are encouraged to participate in snack preparation. Instructions for preparing a snack are sequences, and involve many opportunities for discussing shapes, number/counting, and comparisons, one-to-one correspondence (1 slice of cheese for each cracker, etc.), and more.

V. Snack time is a recurring opportunity to develop social skills and Executive Function. Children learn about responsibility, manners, self-control (waiting for a serving bowl or plate to be passed to them), fairness regarding servings and sizes, cleaning up your own spills, clearing your place when finished, pushing in chairs when you get up from the table, and working together (fruit salad) for the welfare of the group, and so on.

VI. In addition, children can learn large and fine motor skills by cutting up fruit (use a table knife rather than a paring knife or plastic knife), stirring mixtures, spooning into cups, carrying plates and bowls from one place to another without dropping, and actually doing all those verbs in item Literacy IV above.

Note: I think this context would work either in a home environment or a classroom setting with a few children at a small table. Modeling healthy snack choices would be beneficial.