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Fort Drum families get adventurous with food to learn healthy eating habits

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- Parents and children explored different flavors, colors, shapes, and textures that can make food an everyday adventure during a class Oct. 16 inside the Soldier and Family Readiness Division’s Enrichment Center at Fort Drum.  
  
Family Advocacy Program and Exceptional Family Member Program staff members teamed up with U.S. Army Medical Activity Department dietitians to present Sensory Eating Adventures for families to discuss the particulars about eating habits.  
  
The traditional notion that children should not play with their food was debunked throughout the course as trays of food were turned into fruit and veggie kabobs, an edible sensory bowl, and a Dino Island. In the spirit of Halloween, family members also learned how to turn an orange pepper into a Jack-o-Lantern.  
  
Nicole Wetzel, Fort Drum FAP educator, said children should be encouraged to be playful and curious about food.  
  
“A lot of kids who have sensory issues or are picky eaters have had some sort of bad experience with food,” she said. “So, we want to try to erase those bad experiences with fun experiences, which, for children, is play. Getting them to play with fun-shaped food is a better way for them to touch it, and now they’re more likely to try eating it.”  
  
Attendees used a variety of cutters to change the way food looks, which they used to make creative kabobs by mixing up shape and color patterns on the stick. The Dino Island recipe was a way to create a jungle on a plate, with sweet potato volcanoes and trees made from broccoli and asparagus.  
  
Wetzel said parents don’t have to overwhelm themselves by making every meal an “adventure.”  
  
“Every meal like that would probably become chaotic,” she said. “But it would be beneficial getting them to play in other ways, like with all the sensory toys – non-edible – that can help them associate it more with that positive experience.”  
  
Kim Lawton, Fort Drum EFMP system navigator, said they deliberately designed it as an “adventure” rather than a lecture about picky eating.  
  
“We wanted this to be based more on play and experimenting in a fun way, because families don’t want to come and sit through a slide presentation where we just say, ‘This is what you need to know, this is what you should do,’” she said. “People learn in different ways, and getting them engaged in a fun way with a hands-on learning experience is a good way to approach a hot topic like picky eating.”  
  
During the class, Lawton explained how picky eating may be due to sensory processing issues. She said sensory processing is unique to every individual, and children process sensory stimuli differently than adults.  
  
“So, what you might view as a tantrum over certain foods may be a sensory meltdown,” she said. “Whether it’s the smell of the food, the touch of the food, or the look of the food, their brain is not able to process that and causes a behavioral response because their senses are being overloaded.”  
  
Children may find name-brand foods appealing because of their consistency – the same size, taste, and smell every time they eat it. Lawton said sometimes children might find fresh fruit or vegetables unappealing because of inconsistency.  
  
“For example, blueberries can be big or small, sweet or sour, and that unpredictability might deter kids from trying them again,” she said.  
There are some food items that people sample dozens of times before acquiring a taste for them, even into adulthood.  
  
“So, that why it’s important to give your child an opportunity to get away from those ‘safe foods’ and keep introducing them to different foods,” Lawton said.  
  
Lawton said it takes a lot of patience for parents to help their children overcome food aversions.  
  
“Sometimes you might need to give them the food multiple times before they actually taste the food,” she said. “One mom asked about how do they talk to their children – is positive reinforcement the way to go? If a child is playing with their food, and they have never touched that food before, praise them. And then help them get to the next step where they might want to taste it.”  
  
Even if the child makes a mess of their plate and they didn’t eat everything, Lawton said the attempt should be acknowledged.  
  
“It’s about making the process of cooking and eating a positive experience,” she said. “You don’t want to put any negative connotations around food.”  
  
Beatriz Rivera attended the class with her two-and-a-half-year-old son Finn.  
  
“I like how they teach you specific reasons why your kid may or may not like certain foods, and how to tell if it is a sensory issue,” she said.  
  
Rivera said she has attended previous cooking classes with her son to help see what foods he enjoys and different ways to prepare them.  
  
“He also likes seeing other people and kids eating the food versus mom wanting him to try it,” she said.  
  
Rivera said she gives Finn some freedom with his food at home, allowing him to have fun at mealtimes to get him to eat.  
  
“He doesn’t want to be forced to just sit and eat, like it is a task,” she said. “He wants it to be more enjoyable, I’ve noticed, so I don’t mind if he plays with his food while he eats.”  
  
Rivera also said Finn liked making his own kabobs, and she found the way it engages his fine motor skills would make a good at-home activity.  
  
After participants lefts carrying stacks of to-go containers with their culinary creations, Lawton said this was a successful first venture and they will discuss ways to make this a reoccurring class.  
  
“I think it really worked out well for us partnering together like this,” she said. “A lot of parents are already familiar with FAP programming and what we do in EFMP workshops, so having us work with Guthrie dietitians added so much more to the class.”  
  
Families can join the FAP team again for a Monster Pop In and Paint event, from 3 to 6 p.m. Oct. 24 inside the Enrichment Center. For more information and to register, call (315) 772-5914 or message them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/FtdrumFAP](http://www.facebook.com/FtdrumFAP).  
  
Family members also can attend the next Sensory Workshop, scheduled from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. Nov. 1 at the Enrichment Center, to learn more about sensory processing and how it affects one’s behaviors.

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Photo Captions –

Fort Drum family members explored different flavors, colors, shapes, and textures that can make food an everyday adventure during a class Oct. 16 inside the Soldier and Family Readiness Division’s Enrichment Center at Fort Drum. The Sensory Eating Adventures class was a collaborative effort from the Family Advocacy Program and Exceptional Family Member Program staff and U.S. Army Medical Activity Department dietitians to discuss early childhood eating habits, sensory processing and how to make mealtimes a positive experience for families. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)