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## The Effect of Engaging in Food Prep on Willingness to Try New Food

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# The Effect of Engaging in Food Prep on Willingness to Try New Food

An Action Research Report  
By Alyssa Stahl

The Effect of Engaging in Food Prep on Willingness to Try New Food

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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### Abstract

This action research project sought to determine the effects implementing food prep activities in the Montessori primary classroom (ages 2.5-6) had on children's willingness to try new food. Before the food prep activities were implemented, parent questionnaires and student conferences were used to better understand the children's food preferences. During the intervention, tally sheets and observation forms were used to track student participation and their reactions to the foods. After the intervention, additional parent questionnaires were distributed and student conferences were conducted to determine current food preferences of the four foods that were included in the food prep activities. The results indicate that engagement and participation in food prep and cooking lessons increased children's willingness to try new food. Future research is needed to determine if implementing similar strategies in the home will support children's willingness to try new food.

*Keywords:* picky eating, food prep, cooking, Montessori

Children who are introduced to a healthy and varied diet early in life are more likely to develop future healthy food preferences (Skinner, Carruth, Bounds, & Ziegler, 2002). However, in our fast-paced society, it can be challenging for parents to dedicate the time and energy needed to ensure that their children have a balanced, healthy diet. In a world where time is a precious commodity, it is convenient to order take out or delivery in place of cooking a homemade meal. It is just as easy for parents to provide their children with processed, prepackaged food as a quick and easy alternative to meal preparation. With the overabundance of less healthy alternatives, children are missing out on many essential vitamins and nutrients. In addition to healthy eating being inconvenient for parents, there is a myriad of factors that influence children's dietary habits and food preferences. These factors include family preferences, culture, and experience (Kalich, Bauer, & McPartlin, 2014). One of the most challenging food related obstacles parents and caregivers can encounter is picky eating.

Picky eating is defined as “an unwillingness to eat familiar foods or try new foods that is severe enough to interfere with daily routines and cause problems for the parent or child or disrupt the parent-child relationship” (Lumeng, 2005). The problem of picky eating is prevalent today. Many parents find themselves fighting the battle of picky eating. Sagall (2004) found that as many as twenty to thirty percent of children are labeled by their parents as “picky eaters.” There are many characteristics that are associated with picky eating. Jacobi, Agras, Bryson, and Hammer (2003) compared parental descriptions of preschoolers who were picky eaters with those of non-picky preschoolers. Parents who described their children as picky eaters were more likely to report that their children ate a limited variety of foods, wanted the food prepared in specific ways, did not accept new foods readily, and had strong dislikes (Jacobi et al., 2003).

Considering the challenges associated with picky eating, it is often easier and quicker to accommodate the child and provide him with the foods he likes. Unfortunately, this tactic is detrimental and may lead to continued picky eating habits and poor diet quality. It is essential to promote and encourage healthy eating habits and diet variety starting at an early age because diet variety contributes to overall diet quality. Ramsay, Shriver, & Taylor (2017) found that there is a correlation between the variety of fruits and vegetables that children consume and overall diet quality. Skinner et al. (2002) also discovered that among the strongest predictors of the number of foods liked at age eight was the number liked at age four and “a high percentage of children's food preferences are formed as early as age two to three” (Skinner et al., 2002, p. 1646). Considering that food preferences and eating habits are developed at such a young age, it is clear that early intervention is a crucial component in addressing the problem of picky eating.

During these early years, many young children spend a substantial amount of their time in childcare settings. Many of these children consume the majority of their food intake when in the care of early childhood professionals. As a result, early childhood professionals play an integral role in guiding and influencing children's food preferences and eating habits (Kalich et al., 2014). The habits and preferences that are developed in this setting carry over to other areas in the children's lives and they can also promote future healthy habits. Kalich et al. (2014) suggest that “instilling healthy eating behaviors in preschool children through a positive approach supports the development of lifelong health habits that decrease the risk of obesity and other chronic diseases” (p. 8). The many positive implications associated with encouraging and promoting healthy eating habits at an early age and in childcare settings support the use of interventions in the classroom.

In the early childhood classroom, mealtime is a social event where children continually observe the eating habits of their peers and influential adults. These observations aid in the formation of their own preferences and eating behaviors. This social context is an important factor because the eating behaviors of people in the classroom environment provide a model for the developing child (Birch & Fisher, 1998). Modeling by early childhood professionals and peer influence both have a significant effect on children's food preferences and their willingness to try new foods. Birch (1980) found that when children in a preschool setting observed other children choosing and eating vegetables that the observing child did not like, preferences for and intake of the disliked vegetables were increased.

As an early childhood educator, it is disheartening to see the abundance of unhealthy foods parents provide for their children to eat. The lack of variety in the diets of many of the children I have worked with is also concerning. Over the years, many parents have expressed to me that they are at a loss as to how to encourage their children to eat a more healthy and varied diet. Many of the picky eaters in question refuse to eat numerous types of food, often completely cutting out entire food groups. As a result of observing the unhealthy eating habits of several of the children in my class and listening to the concerns of parents about their children's picky eating habits, I was drawn to learn more about this topic. To address the problem of picky eating, I conducted action research in a Montessori primary classroom with children ranging in age from 2.5-6 years of age. Through my research, I sought to discover what effect engaging in food prep and cooking activities would have on the willingness of young children to try new foods.

### **Review of Literature**

Picky eating is a relatively common behavioral problem which can be difficult for parents and caregivers to manage. Approximately 25% of children from 1.5-5 years of age are picky

eaters (Machado, Lima, Campos, & Goncalves, 2016). The prevalence of this problem indicates a need for enhanced awareness and a greater use of methods to address it. The literature available on this topic supports further investigation.

There are five themes that are predominant when reviewing and analyzing the literature related to picky eating in children. **1.** There are many potential causes and factors associated with picky eating. **2.** Variety of food consumption and overall diet quality are linked. **3.** Involving children in cooking and preparing food influences their willingness to try new foods. **4.** Involving children in cooking and preparing food has repeatedly been used as an intervention to encourage their willingness to try new food. **5.** Implementing a multi-disciplinary approach involving all caregivers to address picky eating is optimal.

### **Causes and factors associated with picky eating**

Understanding the causes and factors associated with picky eating is essential when considering intervention methods. Many potential factors contribute to picky eating including family eating habits, socioeconomic status, pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. Galloway, Lee, & Birch (2003) found that picky eating is associated with mothers who have less variety in their own vegetable intake. They also noted a link between picky eating and mothers who perceived their family to have little time to eat healthful foods (Galloway et al., 2003). In addition to parental modeling and family eating habits, socioeconomic status and family make up play a role in food preferences. Machado et al. (2016) found that picky eating is more common in older children from lower-income families with younger parents.

Factors that may contribute to food preferences and picky eating habits occur as early as in the womb. Machado et al. (2016) found an association between picky eating and pregnancy and delivery complications. Contributing factors are also present during infancy. The early

introduction of complementary foods and reduction of breastfeeding before 6 months of age are also associated with picky eating (Shim, Kim, & Mathai, 2011). Considering the many, varied factors that influence eating habits in young children, it is not surprising that approximately 25% of children from 1.5-5 years of age are picky eaters (Machado et al., 2016).

### **Variety and diet quality**

There is a pattern of poor diet quality in young children. Fox et al. (2016) studied the differential between food consumption patterns of children ages 2-3 and the 2015 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. They found that intakes of vegetables and whole grains, in particular, were below recommended amounts for most children (Fox et al., 2016). They also discovered that 99% of children consume more oils, solid fats, and foods with added sugars than the maximum allowance (Fox et al., 2016). Food consumption patterns of young children in the U.S. do not conform to the 2015 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* which indicates poorer diet quality.

Current research indicates that adding variety to the diets of children contributes to overall diet quality. Ramsay, Shriver, & Taylor (2017) conducted a study concerning the diet variety of preschoolers. They found that children who consumed a greater variety of fruits and vegetables were more likely to have higher diet quality (Ramsay et al., 2017). This essential link emphasizes the importance of including variety in the diets of children. Because food preferences and habits develop early in life, it is essential to introduce variety in children's diets at an early age (Fox et al., 2016).

Understanding that there is a problem with diet quality coupled with the knowledge that adding diet variety contributes to diet variety quality, leads to the question of how to increase variety. In working to increase diet variety and develop food preferences of children, Ahern

(2013) stresses the importance of exposure. She emphasizes that familiarizing children with a variety of vegetables through repeated taste exposure is fundamental in increasing children's preferences and intake of vegetables (Ahern, 2013).

### **Involving children in cooking**

Involving children in cooking and preparing food has been shown to influence children's willingness to try new foods and increase the variety of their diets. Ensaff, Canavon, Crawford, and Barker (2015) conducted a qualitative study that explored the impact of a food intervention program. They found that the intervention had an impact on children's willingness to try new food and promoted enjoyment of cooking (Ensaff et al., 2015). The act of engaging in cooking encouraged the children to try foods they may not have been interested in eating before (Ensaff et al., 2015). Potock (2017) also discusses the impact involving children in cooking can have on their willingness to try new foods. Her article explores how cooking and accompanying sensory experiences can help children with autism spectrum disorder try new foods. In addition to providing guidelines on how to introduce children to cooking and food preparation through sensory experiences, Potock (2017) suggests that "food preparation can be a powerful way to counter eating restrictions" (p. 46).

Additional studies support the idea that engaging with food and cooking has an impact on food preferences and willingness to try new foods. Hersch, Perdue, Ambroz, and Boucher (2014) reviewed eight studies to assess the impact of cooking classes on food-related preferences. They found that, when measured, children's willingness to try fruits and vegetables significantly increased after the cooking intervention (Hersch et al., 2014). They also noted that overall consumption of fruits and vegetables increased and willingness to try new food during cooking sessions carried over to mealtimes outside of the intervention (Hersch et al., 2014). When

assessing their school-based intervention, Ensaff et al. (2015) found that parents and school staff noted changes in what foods children were choosing to eat. They also observed an increase in the amount of healthy food the children were eating (Ensaff et al., 2015). These examples emphasize the role cooking and food prep can play as an intervention to address picky eating.

### **Intervention approaches involving cooking**

Involving children in cooking and food preparation can have positive impacts on diet variety and willingness to try new food. Cunningham-Sabo and Lohse (2013) saw significant improvement in fourth-grade students' attitudes about cooking, self-efficacy, and vegetable preferences after implementing an experiential school-based food education program. Similar methods have been proven to be effective with younger students as well. The "Early Sprouts" program is designed to be implemented in a preschool setting (Kalich, Bauer, & McPartlin, 2009). The program includes gardening, sensory explorations, and cooking activities using the six vegetables that were grown. They found that at the conclusion of the program, children were more willing to taste the six highlighted vegetables (Kalich et al., 2009).

In addition to implementing interventions centered around cooking, adding variety during snack can be an effective tool. Roe, Meengs, Birch, & Rolls (2013) conducted a study that involved providing a variety of vegetables and fruit as a snack to see if it led to increased consumption in a childcare facility. Though they observed trends, their findings were not conclusive. Hutchinson et al. (2017) also assessed the snacking patterns of preschool-aged children. They identified areas in need of improvement and suggested that children should be encouraged to consume healthful snacks.

### **Implementing a multi-disciplinary approach involving all caregivers**

All caregivers should be involved when implementing strategies to address picky eating. Burton-Shepherd (2012) advocates for a multidisciplinary approach to address picky eating that involves all caregivers involved in a child's life. Nicklas et al. (2001) support this notion. They stress the fact that children's food preferences and practices are initiated early in life, and as a result, early dietary intervention programs can have both immediate and lasting nutritional benefits (Nicklas et al., 2012). In addition to early intervention, they recognize the importance of involving families and child-care professionals in addressing food-related behaviors (Nicklas et al., 2012). With a wholistic approach that involves all caregivers, children can be exposed to new foods with consistency.

Reviewing the literature indicates that picky eating is a problem in today's society. The use of interventions that involves children in food preparation and cooking will encourage children to try new foods and add variety to their diets. Increased diet variety is linked to overall diet quality which will influence future eating habits.

### **Methodology**

Prior to the research process, both active and passive consent forms were distributed. The active consent forms outlined the parents' agreement to participate in the research by completing two questionnaires. One questionnaire was to be completed at the beginning of the study and one was to be completed at the end. All parents agreed to participate. The passive consent forms explained the extent of the children's participation in the study and provided parents with the option to opt-out of having their children's data included in the analysis. No parents chose to opt-out.

Once the consent forms were returned, the parent questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire included a list of 32 healthy foods (see Appendix A). Parents indicated whether or not their children had tried the foods before and if they had tried the food, whether or not they liked it. Parents also listed their children's three favorite foods and three foods that their children didn't like or avoided. They also indicated on a scale from 1-10 their children's willingness to try new foods, described methods they used to introduce their children to new food, described the amount of variety in their children's diets, and assessed how balanced their children's diets were and how nutritious the food that their children ate were.

Student conferences were conducted individually in the classroom. The conferences included identical questions about food preferences as those found on the parent questionnaire (see Appendix B). The children were asked whether or not they had tried each of the thirty-two listed foods. If they indicated that they had tried a food, they were then asked if they liked it. To aid in accurate food identification, the children were shown images of each of the foods. The children were also asked to name their three favorite foods, three foods they disliked, and if they liked to try new food.

Based on the results from the parent questionnaires and student conferences, it was determined which foods from the list had the highest combined totals of children who had not tried the food or had tried but didn't like the food. The top ten foods that fell into this category included asparagus, beets, brussels sprouts, chia seeds, collard greens, eggplant, kohlrabi, lima beans, sprouts, and squash. From the list of ten least desirable foods, beets, squash, kohlrabi, and sprouts were chosen as the four foods that would be focused on during the intervention. This decision was made based on their compatibility with being prepared and cooked by children in a classroom setting.

During the food prep and cooking portion of the research, each food was focused on for one week. Throughout each week the children interacted with the food through individual food prep and cooking activities. The food prep lessons were presented by the teacher on Monday of each week and they were set up to be used by the children individually and independently with little or no adult guidance after the initial lesson. These lessons were then available on the practical life shelves for a period of five days. Additionally, on Thursday and Friday of each week, the food was featured in a separate, more involved, cooking activity that incorporated supplementary ingredients. The teacher presented the cooking lesson on Thursday and the children were able to choose it independently receiving adult guidance as needed.

The weekly food prep and cooking lessons provided many opportunities for the children to taste the foods that were focused on. In addition to trying the food when they prepared it, the children were offered samples of the food their classmates had prepared. The following table provides information about the food prep and cooking lessons that were focused on during each of the four weeks.

	<b>Food Prep</b>	<b>Cooking</b>
<b>Week 1 - Beets</b>	washed, peeled, cut, served, and ate raw beets	prepared and cooked sweet potato and beet latke on a griddle
<b>Week 2 - Squash</b>	washed, cut, served, and ate raw summer squash	prepared and cooked parmesan breaded summer squash in the toaster oven
<b>Week 3 - Sprouts</b>	started and cared for lentil sprouts throughout the week	assembled sandwiches containing the sprouts and added sprouts to vegetable beef soup
<b>Week 4 - Kohlrabi</b>	washed, peeled, cut, served, and ate raw kohlrabi	prepared and roasted kohlrabi slices in the toaster oven

During work time, when the children were engaging with the food prep and cooking lessons, a tally sheet and observation prompts were used to assess how children responded (see Appendices C and D). The tally sheet included columns to record the frequency at which each child interacted with the food prep work, if they tried the food and ate only one bite, and if they tried the food and ate more than one bite. There were also columns that were used to indicate if a child accepted food offered to him by another child and if he was offered food but did not accept. The observation prompts allowed for more qualitative data collection. The prompts outlined several questions to ponder when observing the children interacting with the food, eating the food, and when they were offered the food by one of their peers.

At the conclusion of the food prep portion of the research, the second round of parent questionnaires were distributed (see Appendix E). The questionnaires asked if the children talked about the food prep and cooking activities at home with their parents and whether or not they showed excitement and enthusiasm for the activities. Parents were also asked which foods their children talked about at home and if any of the new foods were requested by the children. Finally, the parents were asked to describe their children's willingness to try new food on a scale from one to ten.

A post student conference was also conducted (see Appendix F). The children were asked about their current preferences for the four foods that were focused on during the intervention. They were asked, "When we were cooking in the classroom, did you try the \_\_\_\_\_," "Did you like the \_\_\_\_\_?" and "Would you like to eat \_\_\_\_\_ again?" The children were also asked if they enjoyed cooking in the classroom and if they liked to try new food.

### **Analysis of Data**

The initial parent questionnaire and student conference results revealed that asparagus, beets, brussels sprouts, chia seeds, collard greens, eggplant, kohlrabi, lima beans, sprouts, and squash had the highest combined totals of “hasn’t tried” and “has tried and doesn’t like.” From this list of ten foods, beets, squash, sprouts, and kohlrabi were used during the food prep and cooking phases of the project. These four foods represent variety between “hasn’t tried” and “has tried and doesn’t like” responses.

Twenty-one total responses marked “hasn’t tried” or “has tried and doesn’t like” for beets. Ten responses indicated that the children had not tried beets. Eleven responses indicated that the children had tried but did not like beets. Twenty-four total responses were marked as “hasn’t tried” or “has tried and doesn’t like” for squash. Ten responses indicated that the children had not tried squash previously. Fourteen responses indicated that the children had tried squash before but did not like it. Twenty-four total responses checked “hasn’t tried” or “has tried and doesn’t like” for sprouts. Eighteen total responses revealed that the children had not tried sprouts. Eight responses indicated that the children had tried but did not like sprouts. A total of twenty-seven responses were marked as “hasn’t tried” or “has tried and doesn’t like” for kohlrabi. Twenty-four total responses indicated that the children had not tried Kohlrabi. Three responses indicated that the children had tried but did not like kohlrabi.

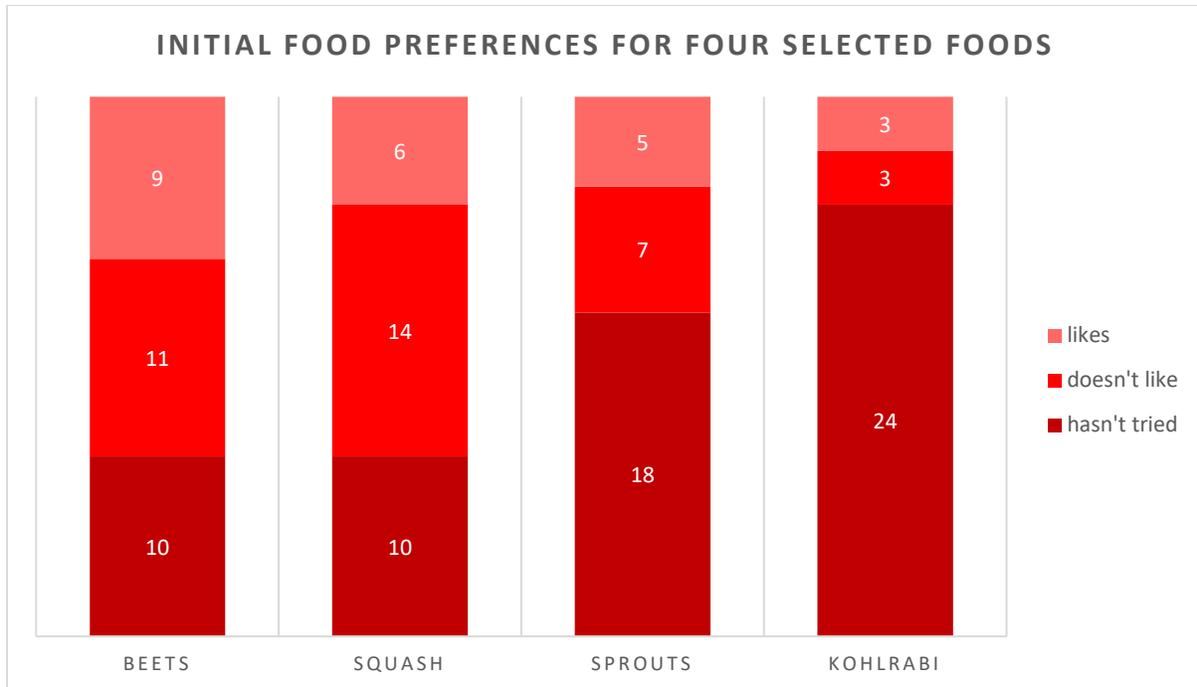


Figure 1. Combined responses from parents and children for initial beet, squash, sprout, and kohlrabi preferences

When comparing children’s food preferences with the parent’s perception of their preferences, the children rated more foods as “hasn’t tried.” In fact, twenty-nine of the thirty-two foods were rated higher in the hasn’t tried category by the children than the parents. Parents rated foods as “has tried and doesn’t like” and “has tried and likes” more often than the children. This may be due to the children not remembering trying these foods or improper food identification. When considering only foods that the children had tried before, both parents and children stated that the children liked the foods more often than they stated that the children did not like the foods.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 display comparisons between child and parent perceptions of food preferences. Figure 2 compares the total number of responses of “hasn’t tried,” “has tried and doesn’t like,” and “has tried and likes” from both parents and children. Figure 3 compares only child responses and Figure 4 compares only parent responses.

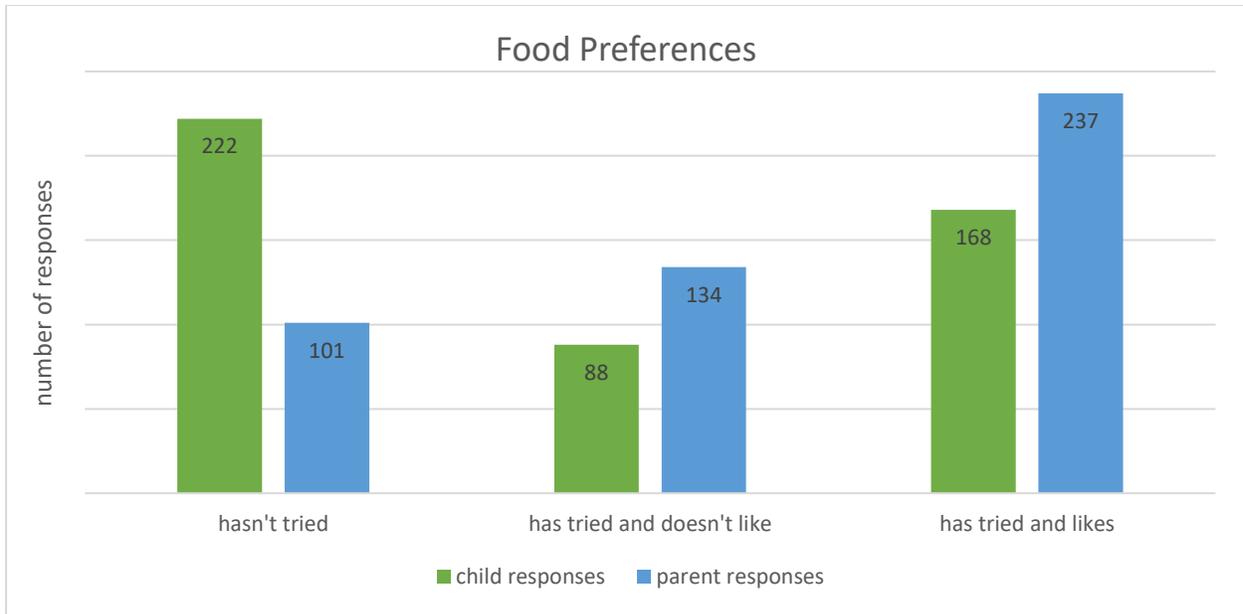


Figure 2. Comparison of child and parent perceptions of food preferences for all foods

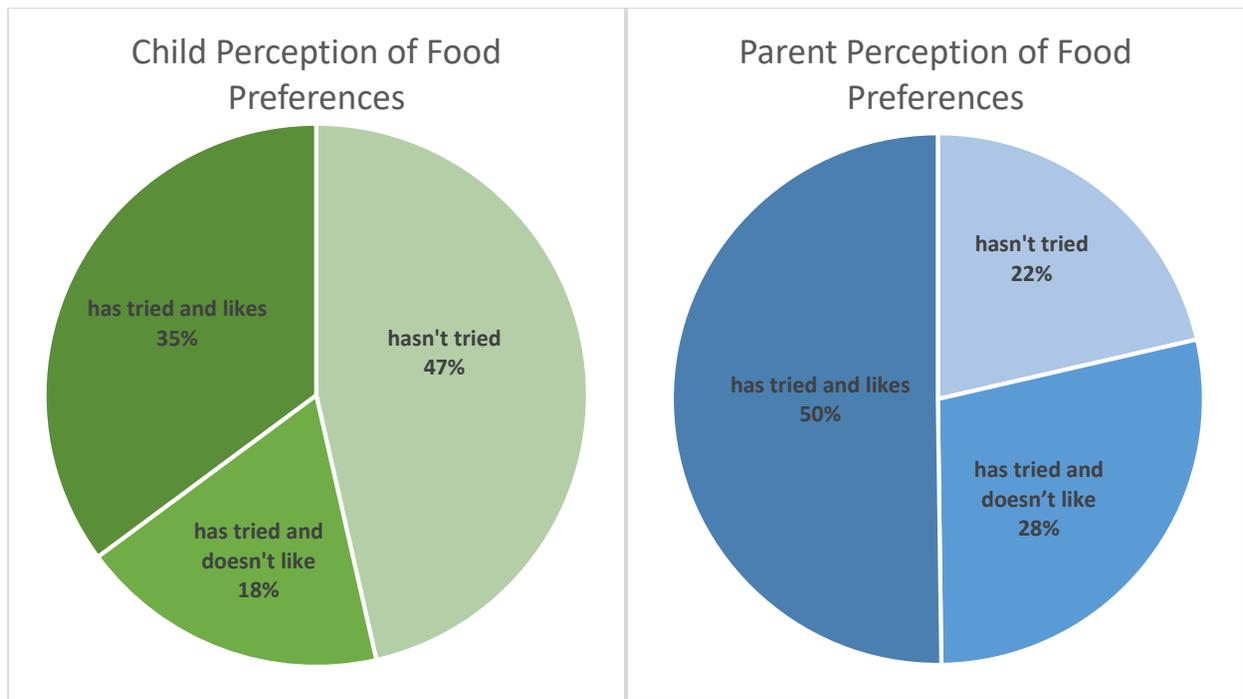


Figure 3. Comparison of child perceptions of food preferences

Figure 4. Comparison of parent perceptions of food preferences

The children were introduced to the four new foods through food prep and cooking lessons. Each time they engaged with the food prep and cooking lessons, they had the opportunity to eat the featured food. The following sections outline the children's experience with each of the four featured foods.

### **Beets**

Every child engaged with the beet food prep lesson on at least one occasion. One child engaged with it seven times! Every child tried the beets when they engaged with the lesson. One child licked the beet for about ten minutes but did not bite and swallow. Another child did not try the beets the first time when engaging with the lesson but ate them the next two times. Beets were also offered to the children by their classmates. Every child was offered beets by their peers on multiple occasions. Nearly every child, with the exception of two, accepted beets each time they were offered. One child declined the beets the first three times they were offered. However, after engaging with the beet food prep lesson twice and tasting the beets, this child accepted beets the remaining four times they were offered. Another child declined the beets on the six occasions they were offered.

The children also participated in a cooking lesson containing beets. Every child engaged with the beet cooking lesson once and they each tried at least one bite of the beet and sweet potato latke. The children were very interested and engaged when participating with this lesson. They showed enthusiasm for cooking and using cooking tools including a mandolin, knife, spatula, and oven mitts. They were particularly excited to use the electric griddle.

When engaging with the both the beet food prep and cooking lessons, the children were very focused. They also showed excitement about serving and eating the beets. There were two children who completely skipped over serving the beets and ate all the pieces themselves.

According to the final parent questionnaires, all but two of the children talked about beets at home. These two children had among the lowest participation levels, each only engaging with the food prep work once. These two children were also offered beets less frequently than their peers (4 times each). However, they accepted beets every time they were offered. During the final student conferences, they both indicated that they enjoyed the beets.

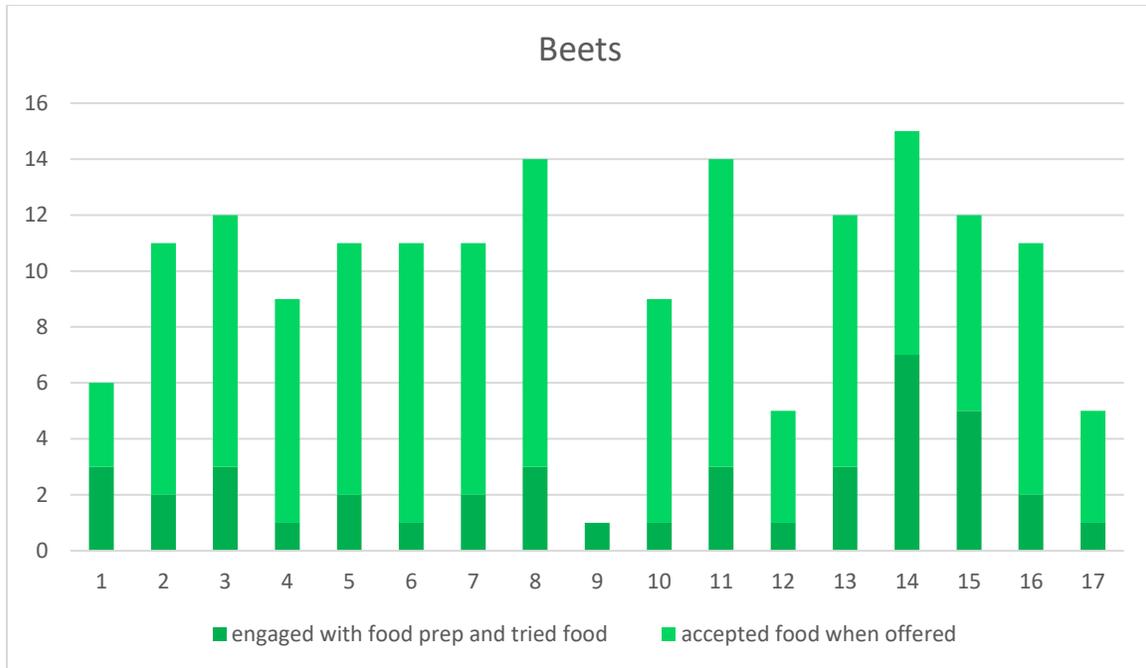


Figure 5. Frequency of beet tasting organized by child

## Squash

The squash food prep and cooking lessons were not quite as popular as the beet lessons, but there was still a wealth of excitement surrounding them. Every child engaged with the squash food prep lesson at least once. Every child, with the exception of two, tried the squash when engaging with the lesson. One child did not try the squash after engaging with the food prep lesson for the first time, but the child did try it the second time. Another child did not eat the squash but spent about five minutes licking it.

The children also had an opportunity to eat squash when it was offered to them by their peers. Every child, with the exception of one child, accepted the squash when it was offered by a classmate. This child politely declined on the four occasions the squash was offered. Another child accepted the squash the fourth time it was offered. This child had previously declined the squash the first three times it was offered.

Every child participated in the cooking lesson involving squash. After cooking their breaded squash, each child took at least one bite. Two children ate only one bite, and the remaining children ate all their food. When engaging with the squash food prep and cooking lessons, the children were very eager and focused. During the final student conferences, sixteen of the seventeen children indicated that they had tried and liked the squash. According to the final parent questionnaires, eight of the twelve children talked about squash at home.

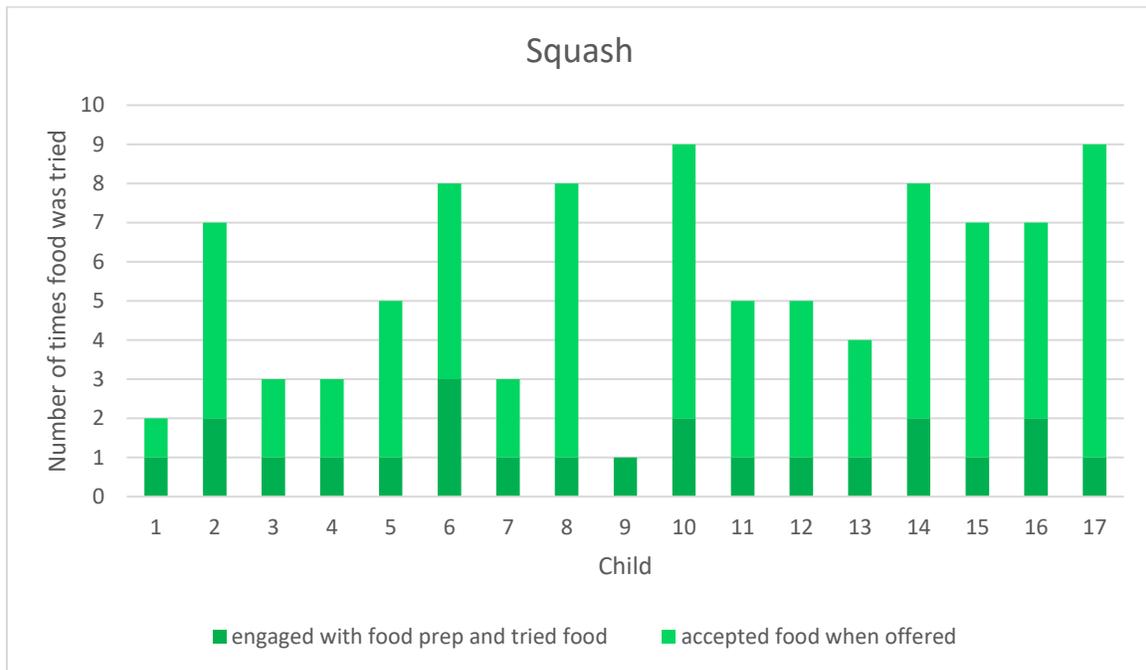


Figure 6. Frequency of squash tasting organized by child

## **Sprouts**

The children particularly enjoyed growing and caring for their sprouts. They were very invested in the process and many of them returned up to six times each day to rinse and drain their sprouts. A few of the children also noticed the neglected sprouts of absent friends and cared for them in addition to their own. The children took pride in what they had accomplished, and their excitement continued to the conclusion of the week when it was time to eat them.

The children enjoyed assembling their own sandwiches with the sprouts they had grown and adding sprouts to beef and vegetable soup. Every child tried the sandwiches they had assembled. One child ate two bites of the sandwich and threw the rest away. The remaining sixteen children all ate their entire sandwich. When sprouts were added to beef and vegetable soup, all of the children ate the soup and many children asked for additional sprouts. One child ate one bite of the sprout and vegetable soup and threw the rest away. Another child declined the soup but ate two cups of plain sprouts.

The children's enthusiasm for sprouts continued once they were home. On the final parent questionnaire, nine of the twelve parents shared that their children had talked about sprouts at home. Three parents reported that their child had requested sprouts at home. During the final student conferences, all seventeen children expressed that they had tried the sprouts, liked the sprouts, and that they would like to eat sprouts again.

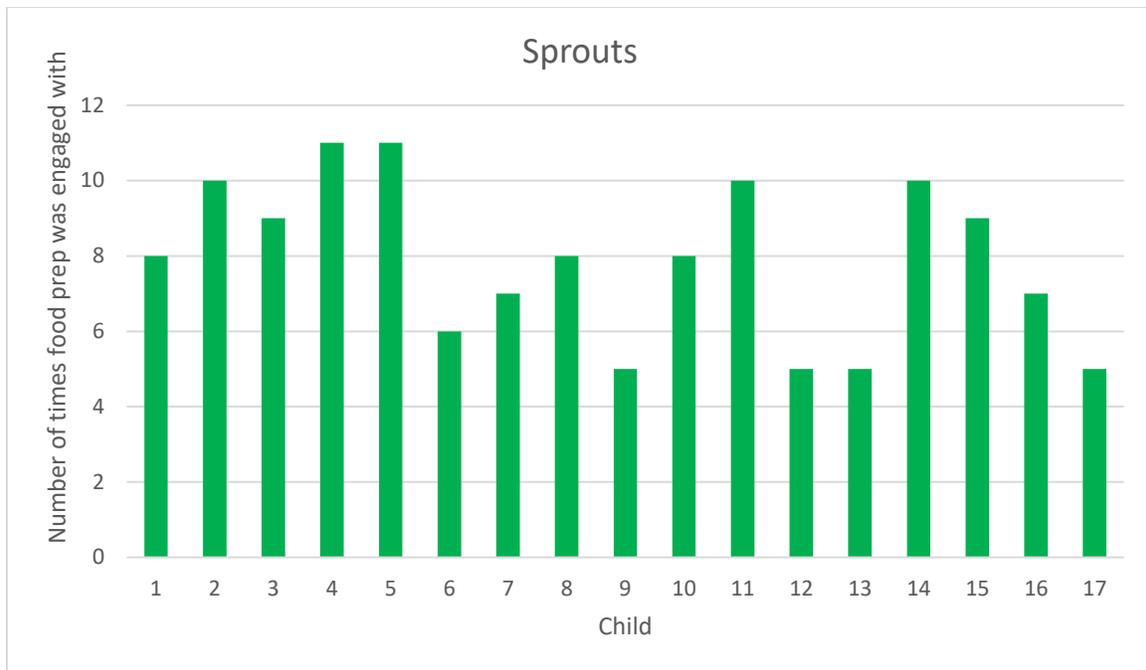


Figure 7. Frequency of sprout tasting organized by child

### **Kohlrabi**

Kohlrabi was the final food that the children engaged with during the project. Every child engaged with the kohlrabi food prep lesson at least once and they each tried the kohlrabi. Child number nine licked the kohlrabi several times but did not eat it. The children were also presented with the opportunity to eat kohlrabi when it was offered to them by their peers. All except one child accepted kohlrabi when it was offered by a classmate. One child declined saying “no thank you” each of the four times the kohlrabi was offered. Four of the children declined the kohlrabi after accepting and eating it several times.

All the children participated in the roasted kohlrabi cooking lesson. After cooking their kohlrabi, every child except one tasted the roasted kohlrabi. Five of the children ate only one bite, and child number nine did not eat the food. The remaining children ate all the food on their plates. During the student conferences, all seventeen children indicated that they liked kohlrabi

and that they would like to eat it again. This message did not follow them home. None of the parents indicated that their children had talked about kohlrabi at home.

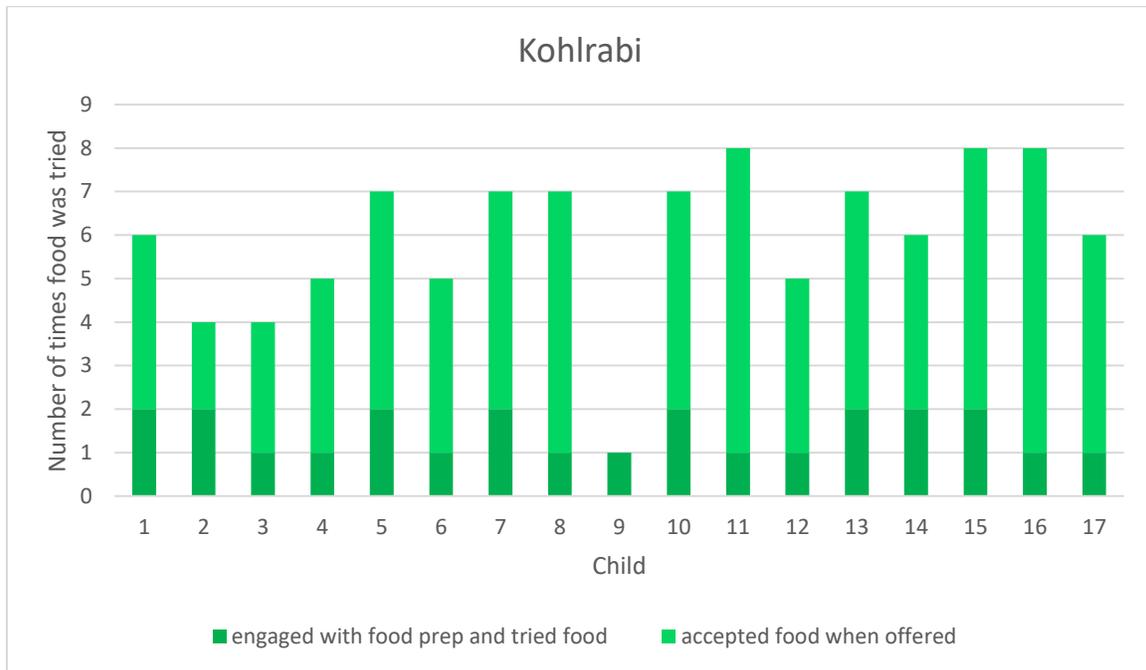


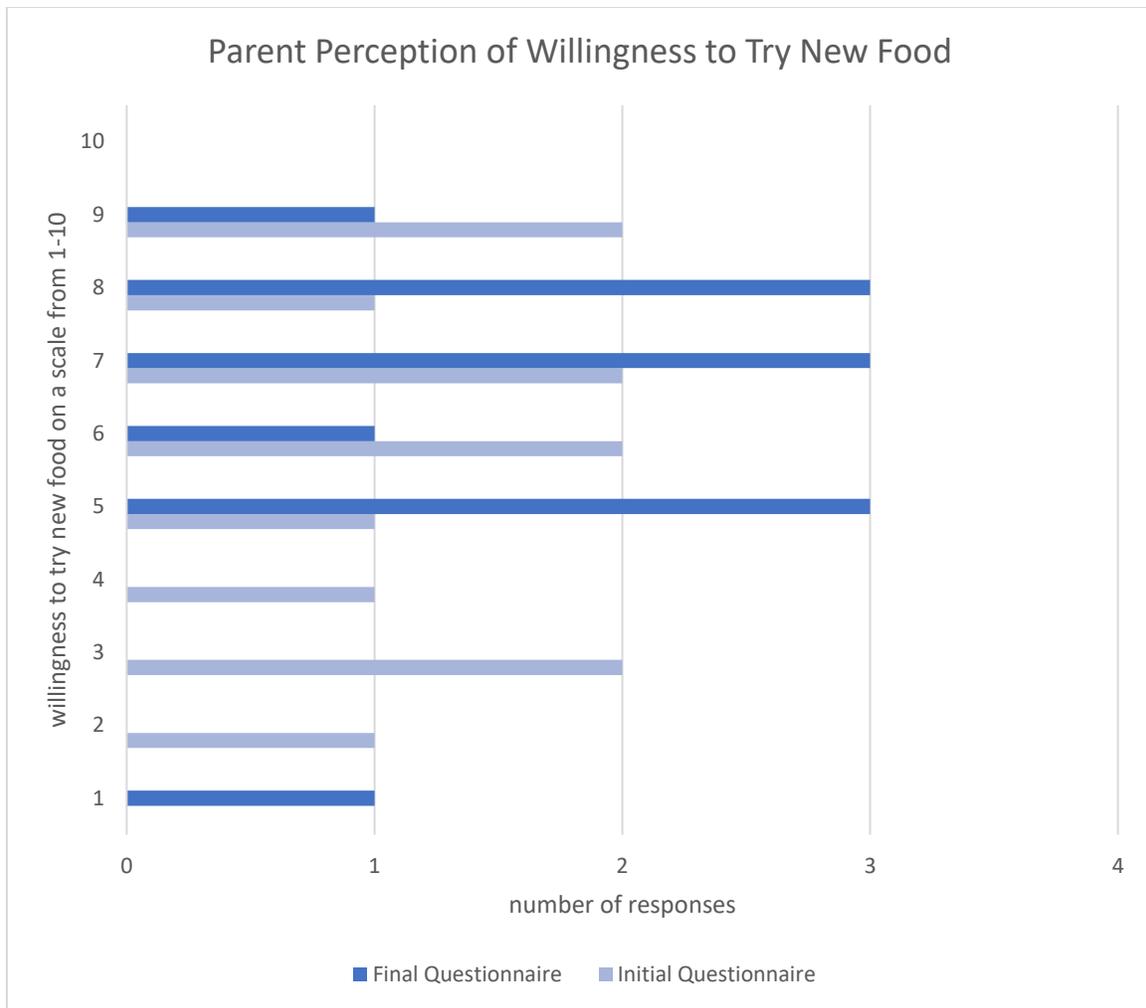
Figure 8. Frequency of kohlrabi tasting organized by child

The children's participation in all the food prep and cooking lessons indicates a willingness to try new food. All the children tried new food throughout the process of the project. Even the children who were more hesitant and those who had originally stated that they do not like to try new food, tried new food.

During the initial conferences, children were asked, "Do you like to try new food?" Fifteen of the seventeen children participated. Six children stated that they like to try new food, eight stated that they do not like to try new food, and one children stated that he likes to try new food sometimes. During the final student conference, the children were once again asked if they like to try new food. All seventeen children stated that they like to try new food. After engaging with food prep and cooking activities in the classroom, the eight children who had previously

stated that they did not like to try new food and the one child who stated that he sometimes liked to try new food all reformed their thoughts on their own willingness to try new food.

Twelve parents filled out both the initial and final parent questionnaires. On the questionnaires parents were prompted to rate their child's willingness to try new food on a scale from one to ten. The results from this question had a lot of variation. Parents rated their children ranging from two through nine on the initial questionnaire. On the final questionnaire, the responses ranged as low as one and as high as nine. Initially, the parent's responses were fairly evenly distributed. All the responses fell between two and nine and each number received one or two responses. The average response was 5.75. On the final questionnaire the distribution shifted. There was a higher concentration above 5 with all results landing there with the exception of one answer rating the child's willingness to try new food as one. The average response was 6.33. Figure 9 demonstrates these changes.



*Figure 9.* Comparison of initial and final parent responses for willingness to try new food

Individual parent's answers of willingness to try new food between the initial and final questionnaires were compared. One parent indicated no change. Seven parents indicated an increase in willingness to try new food (four increased by one point, one increased by three points, and two increased by four points). Four of the parents indicated a decrease in willingness to try new food (two decreased by one point, one decreased by two points, and one decreased by four points).

There was a correlation between the children's and parent's perception of the children's willingness to try new food. In the set of twelve children who had all conference and questionnaire results submitted, five stated during their initial conference that they did not like trying new food. The parents of these five children also indicated that their children had a lower willingness to try new food rating them the lowest of all the questionnaire responses. These parents rated their children's willingness to try new food at five, four, three, three, and two. All responses from other parents were above five. All of these parents with the exception of one indicated growth in their children's willingness to try new food on the final questionnaire. The response of five increased to eight, the response of four increased to five, and both responses of three increased to seven. The parents who initially rated their child's willingness to try new food at two decreased their response to one on the final questionnaire.

There was one specific child whose journey through this process was very intriguing. This child is referred to as "9" in figures 5, 6, 7, and 8. She had a very thought provoking experience and results. This child was identified as being very unwilling to try new food by her parents and by herself. Initially her parents rated her willingness to try new food at two on a scale from one to ten. They justified their answer by stating, "She has her favorites, she is four." During the initial student conference, when asked if she liked to try new food, this child said, "No. I just want to eat the food that I like." From the thirty-two listed foods, she stated that she had never tried twenty-two of the foods, did not like five, and liked five. On the initial parent questionnaire her parents listed only one food as "hasn't tried," thirty foods as "has tried and doesn't like," and one food as "has tried and likes." This child may not have remembered tasting many of the foods that had been offered to her which could explain the vast difference between

her responses and those of her parents. However, she did respond that she liked five of the thirty-two foods when her parents only recorded a positive preference for one food.

During the food prep and cooking phase of the project, this child participated in each of the eight activities. She was hesitant to try the new foods initially, but eventually she was more receptive. She licked the beets, squash, and kohlrabi from the food prep activities for extended periods of time but did not bite into them. After cooking the beet and sweet potato latke, breaded squash, and roasted kohlrabi she took one bite of each and threw the rest away. She also took two bites of the sprout sandwich she assembled before throwing the rest away. During all the food prep and cooking activities, this child exhibited enthusiasm and engagement. During the final student conference, she excitedly reported that she had tried and liked beets, sprouts, and kohlrabi. She also stated that she would like to eat them again. When asked if she had tried the squash when cooking in the classroom she said, "I don't like squash, but when I grow up I will really like it." She also responded that she enjoyed cooking in the classroom and that she likes to try new food.

On the final questionnaire the child's parents indicated that she talked about the food prep and cooking lessons at home and that she showed enthusiasm for them. They also indicated that she specifically talked about beets, squash, and kohlrabi at home. When prompted to rate her willingness to try new food on a scale from one to ten, the child's parents selected one. They also commented that "she is very unwilling and difficult with new food" adding that "there are only a few things that she enjoys."

This process provided the opportunity for this child to engage with undesirable foods in a nonthreatening and inviting way. She "tried," at least licking, all the foods and exhibited excitement and enthusiasm for the lessons. At the conclusion of the project, this child stated that

she had enjoyed the process, liked three of the four foods, and saw herself as willing to try new food. Even though she did not eat much of the food during the food prep and cooking lessons, she had a significant change in attitude regarding new food. This child may benefit from continued exposure to new food in this manner.

Though the overall results were not as profound as hoped for, and despite the decreases in willingness to try new food on four of the parent questionnaires, there were many successes in this project. The children actively participated in food prep and cooking lessons. They tried the food they had prepared as well as food that was offered to them by their peers. At the conclusion of the project, the children indicated preference for the four foods that had been introduced and many stated that they would like to eat the foods again. Even though there were a few decreases in the parent's perspective of the children's willingness to try new food, there was a distinct upward trend. The introduction of new food through food prep and cooking lessons in the Montessori primary classroom had a positive impact on the children's willingness to try new food.

### **Action Plan**

The findings of this action research project demonstrate that food prep and cooking in the Montessori primary classroom positively influences children's willingness to try new food. When children engaged in preparing and cooking new food in the classroom, they showed an interest in trying and eating the food they had prepared. These positive, individual interactions with food that were self-driven and engaging provided the children with an introduction to new food in a non-threatening manner. After these interactions, the children's excitement for trying the foods and self-reported willingness to try new foods increased. On average, parents also

witnessed a change in their children's excitement about new foods and willingness to try new foods.

Considering the results of the action research, moving forward the researcher will incorporate a greater amount of food prep and cooking lessons in the classroom. These lessons will also be offered more often than they had been previously. In addition to offering a greater quantity of food prep and cooking lessons at an increased frequency, the researcher will add variety to the lessons and introduce more foods that are viewed as undesirable by the children as well as foods that the children are unfamiliar with. The researcher will also seek to use food prep and cooking lessons specifically to encourage children to try new foods and increase diet variety. This will be achieved by providing food prep and cooking lessons that focus on specific foods that children in the classroom may not have tried previously and foods that they have expressed an unwillingness to try.

The children will benefit from these new experiences. They will gain greater exposure to foods they may not have been exposed to before and they will have opportunities to engage with the new foods through hands-on experiences. The children will also have increased opportunities to observe their peers engaging with the food prep and cooking lessons and trying new foods. The results of this study suggest that the combination of these experiences will have a positive impact on the children's perceptions of the experience of trying new food and that they will be more willing to try new food.

To further support children by providing positive experiences that encourage willingness to try new food, the researcher would like to explore the logistics of implementing and encouraging similar strategies in the home. Providing parents with resources and support would promote consistency between the home and school environment. Considering the importance of

having all caregivers involved in encouraging healthy eating, involving parents in this process is the next logical step in continuing the research. Future research could determine if implementing similar strategies in the home would additionally impact children's willingness to try new food. Involving the family in the process of using food prep and cooking lessons to introduce new foods in the home may have additional benefits for the children and for the family as a whole that have not yet been explored.

In addition to exploring the implications of encouraging child involvement in food prep and cooking in the home, the researcher would like to further explore the effect peer influence has on willingness to try new food. Throughout the study, the children served the food they had prepared to their classmates. The children who were offered the food could either politely accept or decline the food that was offered. This provided many opportunities for the children to observe their peers eating the food. It also sparked conversation between the children about the food. The children engaged in conversation about their experiences preparing the food, what the food tasted like, and whether or not they liked the food. They also shared their personal journeys to food acceptance. One child shared his experience with a classmate who was hesitant to taste beets. He said, "When I first did this work I didn't try the beets. I didn't think that I liked them because they didn't look good to me. But then I tried them, and I found out that I really like beets! If you try them, maybe you'll find out that you really like them too." The researcher would like to investigate the influence these peer interactions have on willingness to try new food.

The benefits of the action research go beyond those that were experienced by the participating school community. Educators, parents, and researchers can learn from the results and implications of the research. Educators can use the action research as a model when

implementing their own food prep and cooking programs. The action research can serve as inspiration for parents who are seeking to encourage their children to try new foods and be more adventurous in their eating. Researchers can build on the concepts established in the research. They can implement strategies and develop research projects that build on the findings of this action research. Overall, no matter the audience, this research will increase awareness of using food prep and cooking lessons in the Montessori classroom to increase children's willingness to try new food.

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Appendix A

Initial Parent Questionnaire

**Parent Questionnaire**

check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study

check here if you would like to continue and will allow your responses to be included in the study

**Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. Completing this feedback form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.**

Your child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	hasn't tried	has tried and doesn't like	has tried and likes
asparagus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
beets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
bell peppers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
black beans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
broccoli	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
brussels sprouts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cabbage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	hasn't tried	has tried and doesn't like	has tried and likes
cauliflower	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
chia seeds	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
chickpeas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
collard greens	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
couscous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cranberries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cucumbers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
edamame	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
eggplant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
green beans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
hardboiled egg	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
kale	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
kohlrabi	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lentils	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
lima beans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
mushrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	hasn't tried	has tried and doesn't like	has tried and likes
pomegranates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
quinoa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
seaweed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
spinach	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
sprouts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
squash	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
sweet potatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
tomatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
whole wheat bread	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<b>List your child's three favorite foods.</b>		
_____	_____	_____

<b>List three foods your child doesn't like or avoids.</b>		
_____	_____	_____

<b>On a scale from 1-10, describe your child's willingness to try new foods.</b>									
<b>refuses to try new foods</b>					<b>eager to try new foods</b>				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____									
_____									
_____									
_____									

<b>Describe the methods you use to introduce your child to new food.</b>
_____
_____
_____
_____

<b>Describe the amount of variety in your child's diet.</b>		
<b>very little variety</b>	<b>moderate variety</b>	<b>lots of variety</b>
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____		
_____		
_____		
_____		

<b>Overall, how balanced do you feel your child's diet is?</b>		
<b>not very balanced</b> <input type="radio"/>	<b>moderately balanced</b> <input type="radio"/>	<b>very balanced</b> <input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____		

<b>Overall, how nutritious do you feel that the food your child eats is?</b>		
<b>not very nutritious</b> <input type="radio"/>	<b>moderately nutritious</b> <input type="radio"/>	<b>very nutritious</b> <input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____		

Appendix B  
Initial Student Conference

**Student Conference**

Child: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>What is your favorite food?</b>		
_____	_____	_____

<b>What food do you dislike?</b>		
_____	_____	_____

<b>Do you like to try new food?</b>		
<b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/>	_____ <input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____		
_____		
_____		
_____		

Ask, "have you tried _____?" If the answer is "yes," follow up with, "do you like it?"			
	hasn't tried	has tried and doesn't like	has tried and likes
asparagus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
beets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
bell peppers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
black beans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
broccoli	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
brussels sprouts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cabbage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cauliflower	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
chia seeds	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
chickpeas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
collard greens	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
couscous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cranberries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
cucumbers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
edamame	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<b>eggplant</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>green beans</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>hardboiled egg</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>kale</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>kohlrabi</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>lentils</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>lima beans</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>mushrooms</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>pomegranates</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>quinoa</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>seaweed</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>spinach</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>sprouts</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>squash</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>sweet potatoes</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>tomatoes</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>whole wheat bread</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix C

Tally Sheet

**Tally Sheet**

**Week:** \_\_\_\_\_

student	engaged with food prep work	tried food (one bite)	tried food (more than one bite)	accepted food offered (tried one bite)	accepted food offered (tried more than one bite)	was offered food and did not accept
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						

Appendix D  
Observation Prompts

**Observation Prompts**

Week: \_\_\_\_\_

**How do the children interact with the food?**

**Do they seem interested and engaged?**

**Do they try the food? If so, what reaction do they have? How much do they eat?**

**Do they appear to like or dislike the food? Is there a physical reaction associated with tasting the food?**

**When food is offered to another child, note the child and whether or not the food was accepted. Does that child appear to like or dislike the food? Is there a physical reaction associated with tasting the food?**

**Are there any interactions between two or more children that may influence willingness to try the food?**

Appendix E  
Final Parent Questionnaire

## Parent Questionnaire

check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study

check here if you would like to continue and will allow your responses to be included in the study

**Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. Completing this feedback form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.**

Your child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Over the last four weeks your child has been engaging in various food prep and cooking activities in the classroom. We have been working specifically with foods that were commonly described as undesirable or unknown on the initial parent questionnaires and during the student conferences the children participated in at the beginning of the study. Following are several questions regarding your child's reaction to the food prep and cooking activities.

Has your child talked about the food prep activities we have been working on at school?	yes <input type="radio"/>	no <input type="radio"/>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------	--------------------------

Has your child shown enthusiasm or excitement for the food prep and cooking activities?	yes <input type="radio"/>	no <input type="radio"/>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------	--------------------------

<b>Has your child talked about the following foods?</b>			
<b>beets</b>	<b>squash</b>	<b>sprouts</b>	<b>kohlrabi</b>
yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>

<b>Has your child requested any of these foods at home?</b>	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
<b>List the requested foods:</b>	

<b>On a scale from 1-10, describe your child's willingness to try new foods.</b>									
<b>refuses to try new foods</b>					<b>eager to try new foods</b>				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>additional comments:</b> _____									
_____									
_____									
_____									

<b>Is there anything else you'd like to add?</b>
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix F  
Final Student Conferences

## Student Conference

Child: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

When we were cooking in the classroom, did you try the beets?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Did you like the beets?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Would you like to eat beets again?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>

When we were cooking in the classroom, did you try the squash?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Did you like the squash?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Would you like to eat squash again?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>

When we were cooking in the classroom, did you try the sprouts?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Did you like the sprouts?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>
Would you like to eat sprouts again?	yes <input type="radio"/> no <input type="radio"/>

<b>When we were cooking in the classroom, did you try the kohlrabi?</b>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/> <b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>
<b>Did you like the kohlrabi?</b>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/> <b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>
<b>Would you like to eat kohlrabi again?</b>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/> <b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>

<b>Did you enjoy cooking in the classroom?</b>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/> <b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>
------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------

<b>Do you like to try new food?</b>	<b>yes</b> <input type="radio"/> <b>no</b> <input type="radio"/>
-------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------