



## Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning

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This *CASEtool* includes a description of the development and use of the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* (referred to throughout this document as the *Recipe*). The *Recipe* is a tool to assist parents with identifying their children's interests associated with a specific activity and to prompt them to use responsive strategies to engage children in those activities. The *Recipe* is designed to be used by parents to promote interest-based learning during everyday activities or routines. The *Recipe* is intended to increase the likelihood that parents will reflect on the characteristics of activities that are engaging to their children and promote learning that emphasizes those characteristics each time the activity is replicated.

### INTRODUCTION

The *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* is a tool developed for parents to use with their children in early learning groups and in the home. The tool promotes parent involvement by identifying their children's areas of high interest during a group activity that are likely to keep the child engaged. The *Recipe* also prompts the parent or caregiver to use responsive strategies for engaging the children in those activities. This tool allows parents and caregivers to focus their time and energy on the aspects of an activity that are likely to have the most (positive) impact on promoting child development.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE *RECIPE*

The conceptual framework for the *Recipe* is based on research about practices that promote parents' and caregivers' abilities to increase children's interest-based participation in a variety of everyday activities and to provide opportunities for child-initiated and child-directed learning. Referred to as Contextually Mediated Practices™ (CMP), this approach uses *child interests* to determine development enhancing activities in which children could engage, focuses on the *learning opportunities* the activity naturally affords, and emphasizes the *responsive teaching strategies* parents and caregivers use to maximize child participation and learning. This approach differs from more traditional approaches to early childhood education where adults often direct what and how a child learns (Raab & Dunst, 2006).

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### Child Interest and learning Opportunities

The *Recipe* is based on the premise that interest-based activities are important sources of child learning opportunities because children tend to stay more engaged in activities that highly interest them. When children engage in interest-based activities, they experience limitless learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab, & McLean, 1998; Dunst, Herter, & Shields, 2000; Kim & Mahoney, 2004). The *Recipe* heightens parent and caregiver awareness of these learning opportunities and helps parents and caregivers plan and implement responsive strategies for supporting and enhancing child learning.

Interests can and do influence a child's involvement and learning in everyday activities, the ways in which he/she engages in activities, and his/her development of new understanding and abilities (Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992). Parents and other caregivers can encourage child participation in everyday activities by increasing a child's opportunities to be involved in activities that match his or her interests (Dunst, 2001). A primary goal of parent-child early learning groups is to promote a parent's ability to increase his or her child's opportunities to participate in activities that provide interest-based learning. When a child's interests are used as the basis for his or her involvement in everyday activities, the child becomes occupied by playing, interacting, and participating in the activity. The more interested the child is in the activity the more likely the child is to engage for an extended period of time, allowing the child ample opportunities to explore, discover, try, and learn new things.

### Parent Responsiveness

Parents enhance their children's learning by (a) increasing the number, frequency, and quality of interest-based child learning opportunities, and (b) supporting children's interest-based participation (Raab & Dunst, 2006). In parent-mediated child learning, early childhood group facilitators support child development by strengthening parents' capacity to understand, recognize, and use interest-based learning opportunities with their children. Parents can do this by:

#### *Engaging the child in interest-based activities*

- Help the child get started in the activity.
- Make sure that people and appropriate toys are available to the child.
- Give the child many chances do what he/she can do and likes to do.

#### *Responding to the child's behavior*

- Shift attention to match the child's interests.
- Let the child change what he/she wants to do.
- Make oneself part of the child's play.
- Give the child a sufficient amount of time to respond.

- Modify interactions to match the child's attention span.
- Make sure the child is in the best position possible to interact with objects and people.
- Comment on what the child is doing.
- Arrange the play area to encourage the continuation of the activity.

#### *Encouraging the child to elaborate*

- Use comments, suggestions, and questions to get the child to do new things.
- Offer choices in materials, use gestures to encourage different use of materials, show something new with different materials, etc.
- Play with and take turns with the child.
- Physically assist the child if necessary (Raab, Wortman-Lowe, & Dunst, 1991).

The expected child benefits for parents using these strategies are increased child participation in activities (Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, et al., 1998) and the increased ability to initiate and sustain interactions with objects and people in the environment (Dunst, Holbert, & Wilson, 1990; Dunst & McWilliam, 1988). Through interest-based participation in activities, children have opportunities to practice existing abilities, to acquire and perfect new skills that are useful in participating in a variety of activities (Farver, 1999), to understand the relationship between their own behavior and its consequences (MacTurk & Morgan, 1995), and to become more involved in everyday activities in socially and culturally meaningful ways (Göncü, 1999).

## USING THE RECIPE

### Identifying Child Interest within Activities

Interest-based activities encourage children to use many different behaviors and to provide the best opportunities for exploration and mastery. On the front side of the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-based Child Learning*, parents or caregivers indicate the child's interest in the various components of the activity. Before beginning the early learning group, the parent/caregiver, with or without assistance from the group facilitator, uses the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* to identify the child's interests from the list of learning opportunities included in an activity by circling the smiling face graphic next to that item on the list. These selected interests are the components of the activity that are most likely to be engaging to the child, thereby allowing the child to interact using increasingly more complex abilities or behaviors. For example, when a parent knows that a child is exceptionally interested in water, the parent or caregiver circles the smiling faces next to washing hands, washing fruit, wiping table, and washing dishes for an early learning group

focused on cooking. Circling these steps in the activity helps increase the parent awareness of child interest and can lead to increased focus on supporting the child's participation in these components of the activity. As the child participates, he/she develops more complex abilities and expanded interests. For example, a child who enjoys washing fruits and vegetables may expand this interest into peeling fruits and vegetables. On subsequent visits, these expanded interests would lead the parent to select more steps to further increase the child's participation and to enhance the child's learning opportunities and subsequent skill development.

**Parent/Caregiver Responsiveness**

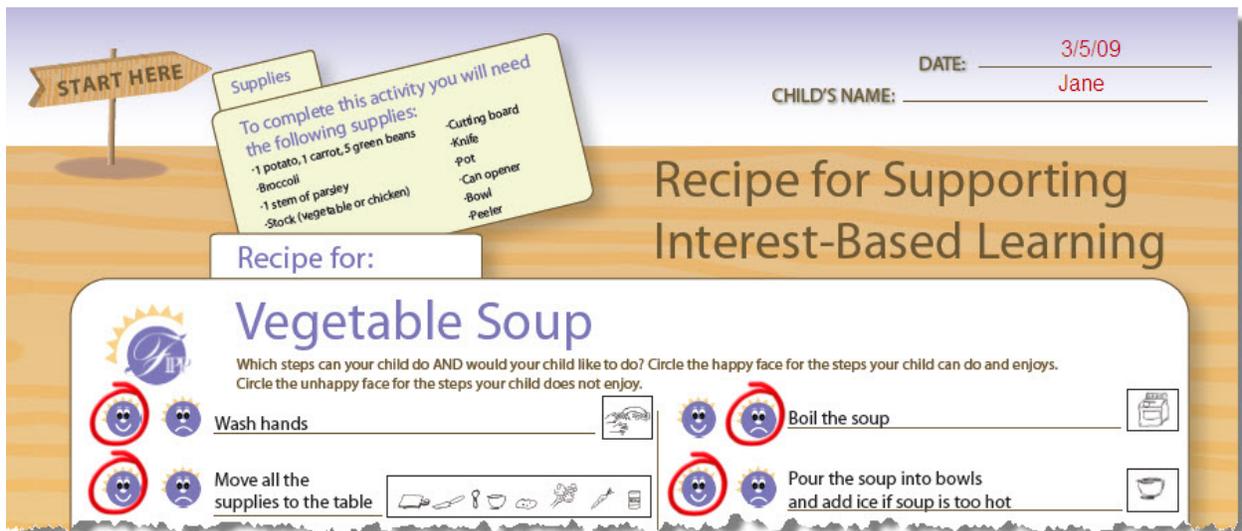
On the reverse side of the *Recipe*, a parent or caregiver is asked to document the strategies he or she plans to use on a particular occasion to support and encourage child participation and learning. These strategies should be intended to support, sustain, and elaborate on child participation in an interest-based activity and may be indicated by placing a checkmark next to the strategies in the appropriate column. Before the activity begins, the parent/caregiver selects the responsive strategies he/she thinks are appropriate and plans to use during the activity.

After the activity, the parent/caregiver indicates the strategies he/she actually implemented. Group facilitators assist parents/caregivers in reflecting on the discrepancy between what was planned and what was implemented and the benefits of the implemented strategies on the

child's participation during the activity. For example, during a parent-child early learning group, the parent might indicate that he or she helped the child get started in the activity (i.e., bringing the child over to the table and sitting down with him/her); shifted attention to match the child's interests (i.e., focusing on only those steps in which the child is interested); and allowed the child to change what he/she wanted to do (i.e., supported the child to move back and forth among the enjoyable steps of the *Recipe*). If the parent/caregiver planned to observe the child's participation in the activity and then did not, the facilitator might engage the parent to reflect on why the parent was not able to make those observations, talk about ways the parent could have observed the child's participation during the activity, and make specific plans about how to implement observations in the future.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECIPE FOR PRACTICE**

Over time, when using the *Recipe*, parents will have a record of their child's interests and the responsive teaching strategies they have implemented. The parent can reflect on how the responsive teaching strategies have resulted in increased child interests and learning by comparing how the *Recipes* have included more interests, and perhaps, more complicated steps over time. This tool is particularly useful in parent-child playgroups or early learning groups, although it can also be used in other contexts.



**Figure 1**  
*This section of the Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Learning shows the components of a specific cooking activity in which this child will be most interested in participating.*

DATE: 3/5/09

CHILD'S NAME: Jane

**1**  
On the activity card on the next page circle the happy face for the steps that your child can do and enjoys.  
Circle the unhappy face for the steps or ingredients your child does not enjoy.

**2**  
Focus your time on the steps that have high interest and minimize or eliminate the parts that have no interest.

**3**  
When focusing on the steps that have high interest remember to try these responsive strategies:

**Responsive Strategies**

I Plan To Do This

I Did This Today

Engaging my child in what is interesting to him/her

Help my child get started in the activity

Make sure that people and appropriate toys are available to my child

Give the child lots of chances to what he/she is interested in and like

**4**  
Write other steps you added to this recipe to increase your child's participation.

**Figure 2**

***This section of the Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Learning shows the responsive strategies the parent used to support her child's participation in an interest-based cooking activity.***

Early Head Start programs can use the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* during group socializations that are a part of the home-based program option. Since parents and children attend group socializations and have weekly home visits, families can use the *Recipe* across contexts, reinforcing the information and strategies used by the parents to compound the benefits to their children.

Early childhood programs can use the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* as handouts for parents to reinforce activities and behaviors parents demonstrate to provide interest-based activities to their children. Programs can also use the *Recipe* to demonstrate the benefits of interest-based learning. These activities and behaviors can be featured during classroom open-house meetings, Parent-Teacher meetings, or the like, to demonstrate how interest-based activities are structured and supported by caring and attentive adults. School personnel can provide the handouts to parents to assist them in continuing to offer interest-based activities at home.

Parents who take home the *Recipe* card from school, a playgroup, or an early learning group can repeatedly engage in the activity with their children to capitalize on the benefits of engaging in an activity multiple times. As children participate in the activity repeatedly, they deepen their level of familiarity and engagement with the steps and expand their interests over time. As parents

also engage in the activity multiple times, the repetition provides opportunities for the parent to add new responsive strategies and to observe the increased benefits to the child. When used over time, the *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* serves as a record of the child's changing interests and development.

The *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* is a convenient single page guide for engaging children in interest-based activities and can easily be adapted and used in a variety of home and community settings. The *Recipe* can be used during food preparation activities, but may also be used to help a parent or caregiver focus on the interest-based aspects of other activities, such as painting or collage-making in an art activity; setting the table or getting dressed in household activities; and riding in the car or playing in the park in community activities. The information the parent or caregiver documents on the *Recipe* helps plan how to support the child during the experience by maximizing the potential learning opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

The *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* contains simple tools that may be easily implemented by early childhood programs that seek to connect families to children's interest-based learning. The *Recipe* cards assist parents and caregivers in

systematically determining child interests and prompt parents and caregivers to interact with children in specific and supportive ways during those interest based activities. The *Recipe* assists early childhood practitioners by offering creative and practical strategies for informing parents and caregivers and for including them in the early childhood education process. The everyday family activities and routines that make up the fabric of family life can be easily converted into opportunities for interest-based child participation if parents know how to engage with and respond to their young children. This tool is easy to use and creates an important bridge between early learning experiences and everyday family life.

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## Appendix

*Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning*

Sarah Sexton

*Tool Descriptions*

The *Recipe for Supporting Interest-Based Child Learning* is a tool developed for parents or caregivers to use with their child in early learning groups and in the home. The tool promotes parent involvement by identifying the child's areas of high interest during a group activity that are likely to keep the child engaged. The *Recipe* also prompts the parent or caregiver to use responsive strategies for engaging the child in those activities. This tool allows parents and caregivers to focus their time and energy on the aspects of an activity that are likely to have the most (positive) impact on promoting child development.

*Tool Use*

**The Supporting My Child page should be printed on the backside of each recipe before distributing to families.**

**Step 1:**

Identifying child interests: On the front of the *Recipe*, circle the happy face for the steps that the child can do and that the child enjoys. These are the steps of the activity you will focus on with the child. Circle the unhappy face for the steps or ingredients the child does not enjoy. These are the steps of the activity that you will not focus on with the child, as they will not provide good learning opportunities until the child begins to show some interest.

**Step 2:**

Focus on the interests: Focus your time on the steps that have high interest and minimize or eliminate the child's participation in the steps that have no interest. After multiple exposures to this activity, it is likely that the child will expand his/her interests and become interested in steps that were previously uninteresting to him/her.

**Step 3:**

Be responsive: When focusing on the steps that have high interest, remember to implement one or more responsive strategies listed on the back of the *Recipe*. First, check the strategies that you plan to try during this activity. When the activity is over, reflect on the responsive strategies you actually used: 1) compare how closely you met your goal and 2) what effect you think your responsiveness had on the child's participation in and enjoyment of the activity.

**Step 4:**

Individualize the activity: On the empty lines of the *Recipe*, write some additional steps to this activity that the child is interested in and/or might enjoy. This recipe should reflect your plan to engage the child in highly interesting activities at this time in his/her life. In a few months, your plan for this activity may look different as the child's interests and abilities may change.

**Step 5:**

Repeat the experience: Learning opportunities are maximized the more a child gets to engage in a highly interesting activity. Try this activity many times at home, altering the plan to meet the child's current interests and abilities and to ensure that the activity is enjoyable to the child.