

Teaching Children About Food Safety

One of the best ways to teach food safety is to practice it and to be vocal about why it is being practiced. Help your children understand that although we cannot see germs, they can make us sick when food is contaminated. Use these ideas to create interest in developing healthy and safe food habits.

SHOW HOW GERMS GROW

Children can quickly learn that “bad germs make you sick.” This simple demonstration shows how much faster germs grow on a table, or your fingers, than in the refrigerator.

1. You will need three small dishes and three packets of dry yeast. Put about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of lukewarm water in one dish, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup boiling water in a second dish and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ice water with an ice cube in the third. Read the label to see if you need to add sugar to help the yeast grow.
2. In a few minutes you should have dramatic evidence that yeast grows faster at room temperature than at hot or cold temperatures. This is because you started with billions of live yeast cells, and at the right temperature yeast produces a lot of gas (carbon dioxide) that makes it bubble and rise. It can make a lasting impression on a child to see how fast “germs” can grow.
3. Most bacteria do not produce gas to bubble and rise and most foods do not have as many bacteria on them as the amount of yeast that you started with, but it also takes fewer bacteria to make us sick.

TEACH HAND WASHING

Careful hand washing is one of the best ways to stop germs from spreading. Here are some ways to share the message.

- Talk about all the things hands do: clap, make clay figures, build sandcastles, pet animals, carry food to your mouth. Hands are very busy and must always be washed with soap and water before handling food.
- Let children look at their hands with a magnifying glass. Remind them that dirt and germs can hide in the lines, cracks and wrinkles. They might see dirt, but they will not see germs, they are too small.
- Let younger children personalize their ideas about germs by tracing their hands, or making a finger print, and then adding eyes, nose, mouth and hair.

MAKE LEARNING FUN

Consider these ideas when planning daily activities:

- Use stickers to teach where foods are stored. Use large ones of different colors on the refrigerator, freezer and cupboard. Put smaller ones of the same color on all foods to show where they belong. If you do not want to use the actual food, use clean empty food containers, or pictures cut from magazines. Or, let the children cut or tear out food pictures from a magazine, and then attach the right stickers.
- Relate storybook monsters who like to eat up things, like the giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk” and the monsters in “Where the Wild Things Are,” to the tiny “monsters” – germs and bacteria, that are always ready to attack foods and make them unsafe. Growing things, like — fruits, vegetables, and animals — are naturally protected against bacteria until they are harvested for food. Then it is a race to see who gets to enjoy the food.

- You will know the food spoilers won if you see mold on bread or cheese, mushy spots on fruits and vegetable, or a bad smell on other foods. Knowing when the food poisoners win is hard because they do not always change the way food looks or smells. Remind children to keep cold food cold, to keep food clean, and to cook food thoroughly.
- Play the “Feed My Friend” variation of “Pin the Tail on the Donkey.” On a life-size outline of a child, mark off areas like the sample in Figure 1. Use a paper cutout of a spoon instead of a tail, and try to pin it on the mouth. If the children can read, put the comments on each area. Otherwise, you comment on why My Friend cannot eat if the spoon touches the rabbit, the ball, the dirty clothes, etc.
- Keep HOT foods HOT and COLD foods COLD.
- Pack a lunch or picnic using a cooler or insulated bag with an ice pack for cold foods and a thermos for hot foods.

FOOD SAFETY AT DAYCARE CENTERS

Parents need to check the practices of the daycare staff when choosing a safe place for their children.

Reports of diarrheal illness in child care centers repeatedly state that the incidence is significantly associated with the proportion of staff who both prepare or handle food and also care for children, particularly if they change diapers. Every effort must be made to assign staff to one task or the other, but not to both. Also, adequate sinks and washing facilities are necessary.

Depending on what foods are being served, temperature requirements must be strictly observed. Perishable foods must not be left between 40 and 140 °F for more than two hours.

Due to its association with infant botulism, honey should not be given to, or used in foods for, infants under 1 year of age. Below this age, infants do not have adequate stomach acid to inactivate botulinal spores. Floppy baby syndrome and some causes of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) are caused by the production of botulinal neurotoxins in their underdeveloped gut.

Sources:

1. Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology. *Teaching Children about Food Safety – A guide for Child Care Providers*. Prepared by Carol L. Hans, R.D., Ph.D. (December 1991).
2. FDA/CFSAN [WWW document]. *For Kids & Educators* URL <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/educate.html>

FOOD FUN ON THE WEB

The Food and Drug Administration has web sites that provide interactive programs for children. Check them out!

<http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/educate.html> and <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/consumerpubs.htm#children>

REVIEW SAFETY TIPS

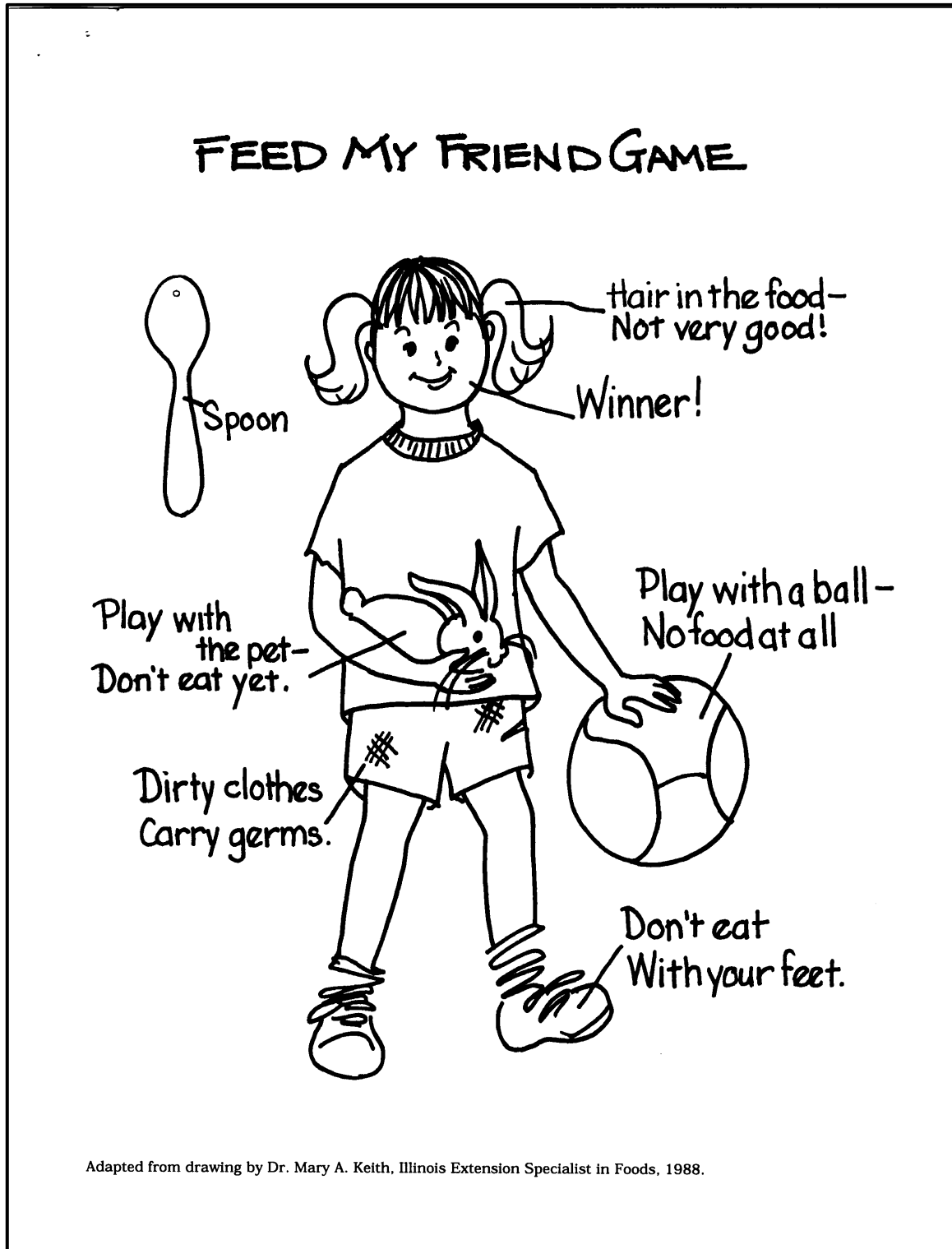
Review these tips with your children and then let them find the six food safety mistakes on the activity page.

- Wash and dry your hands before you make or eat a snack or meal.
- Fruits and vegetables are healthy after-school snacks. Be sure to wash them with cold water before you eat them.
- Learn which foods belong in the refrigerator. Put milk, yogurt, mayonnaise, lunchmeat and eggs back in the refrigerator right away. Don't leave them out on the counter.
- Keep everything in the kitchen clean. Put backpacks on the floor, not the counter. Keep pets off kitchen counters and tables.

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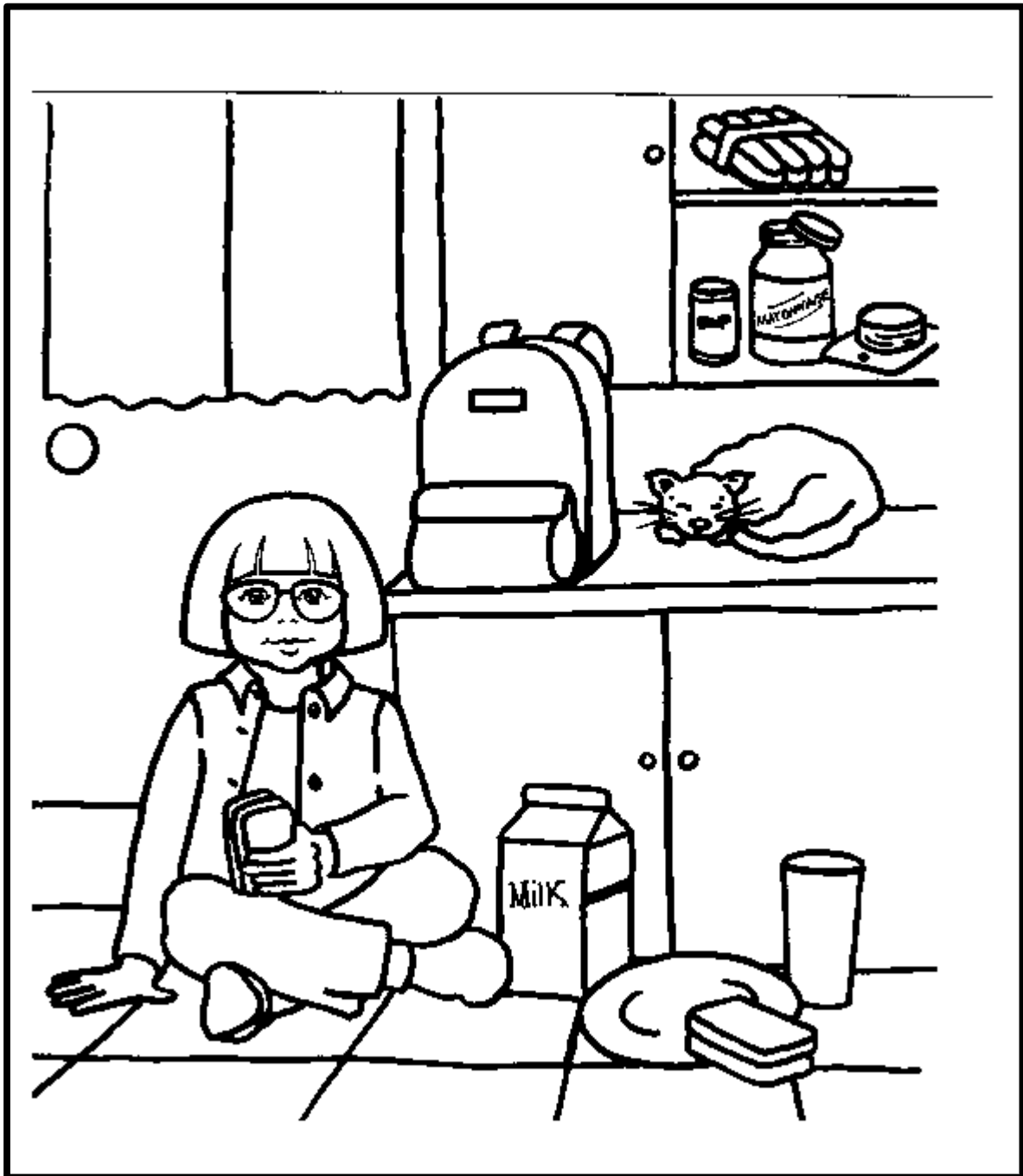
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Figure 1.



Activity Page

Find the six food safety mistakes.



Answers: 1. Mayonnaise is in the cupboard with the lid off. 2. Backpack is on the counter. 3. Cat is on the counter. 4. Milk is not in the refrigerator. 5. Sandwich is on the floor. 6. Hot dogs are in the cupboard.

SOURCE: FDA/CFSAN (1998). *Food Safety at Home, School and When Eating Out* [WWW document]. URL <http://www.foodsafety.gov/~dms/cb-09.html>