Let's talk about taste!

The five senses are a great way for young children to begin to understand their bodies and the world around them. We taste the food we eat using our taste buds, which are found on our tongues.

When we chew food, our saliva begins to break down the food and this allows the taste buds to recognise different tastes. Your taste buds then send signals to our brains to let us know how foods taste different. Some tastes we will like and others we will not.

There are five basic tastes that our tongues can recognise. These five tastes are: Sweet, Salty, Sour, Bitter, and Savory (Umami).

SWEET

Sweet tastes are one of the most pleasing to most people. It makes sense biologically that sweet is a desirable taste because sugar is a core source of energy for the body.

Some examples of sweet foods are: sugar, berries, grapes, desserts, maple syrup, honey, jam, and sweet potatoes.

SALTY

The sodium chloride taste receptor is the most simple taste receptor in our mouth. Salt intake is crucial for a healthy body, so we are programmed to like small amounts of salt but dislike large amounts.

Some examples of salty foods are: table salt, crackers, pretzels, chips, processed meats, crisps, and bacon.

SOUR

Sourness is how we taste the acidity in foods. When we taste acidic solutions our taste buds are identifying 'hydrogen ions' from acids found in our foods. It can cause you to feel a tingling sensation in your mouth.

Some examples of sour foods are: lemons, limes, pickles, sourdough bread, yogurt, vinegar, green apples, sour cream and rhubarb.

BITTER

Bitter taste is the most sensitive of the five tastes. Bitter foods are often 'off-putting'.

Some examples of bitter foods are: coffee, raw cocoa (and very dark chocolate), some leafy greens such as kale and rocket, brussels sprouts, broccoli, olives, and citrus peels.

SAVORY/UMAMI

This is a taste that is not as well know as the first four. It's named umami (Japanese word for pleasant savory taste) because it was discovered by Japanese scientists. It is caused by glutamic acid or aspartic acid.

Glutamic acid is found in ripe tomatoes, meat, and strong cheese, and soy sauce.

Aspartic acid is in asparagus.

Some more examples of savory foods are: shiitake mushrooms, fermented foods, green tea, seafood, carrots, and potatoes, nuts, and legumes.

A simple experiment

In this experiment you will explain the five basic tastes to your child. You will then give them five foods and help them identify which taste the food represents.

You will need a small amount of food from each taste group and little label cards so your child can match the food to the taste.

Once they have done this activity once, supported by an adult to explain the difference they taste.... have a go at blindfolding them or choosing different foods.

Food allergies and choking are the two safety concerns here. If your child has a food allergy to any of the foods I suggest you avoid that food and select something else that is safe for your child to eat.

Choking hazard – Choking is a risk whenever young children eat. So, depending on the age of your child, please make sure the foods are cut into small portions and that the children know to chew the food well before swallowing.

If you are doing this activity with a baby or toddler, please mash or puree the food, for ease. The taste will remain the same.

Activities such as this will support a child in beginning to vocalise some things they like and don't like.

The ability to communicate their likes and dislikes may support a child's ability to communicate about other things such as feelings and emotions with greater confidence.