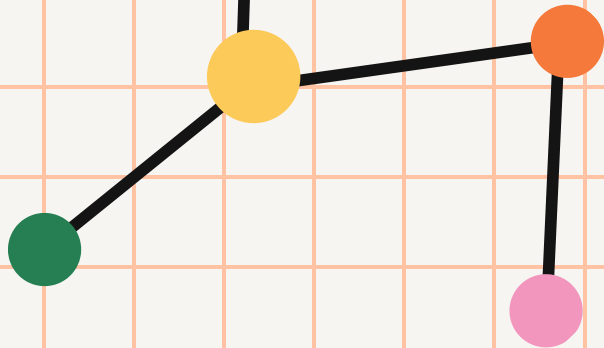


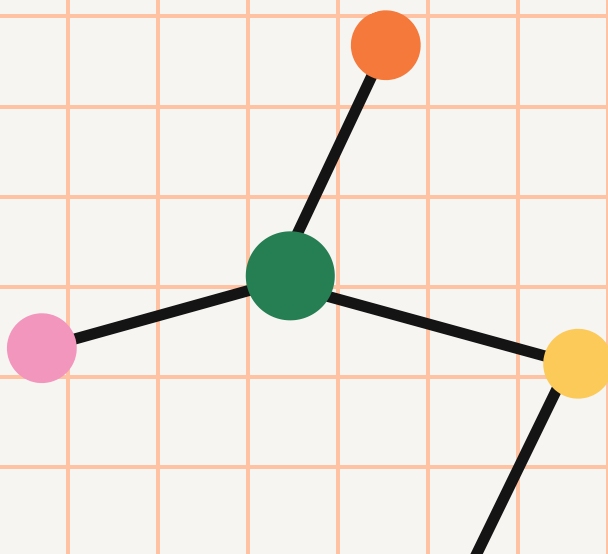
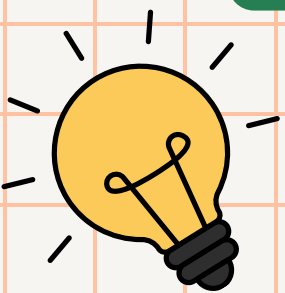


FOOD LABS AT HOME



Family food confidence: one experiment at a time

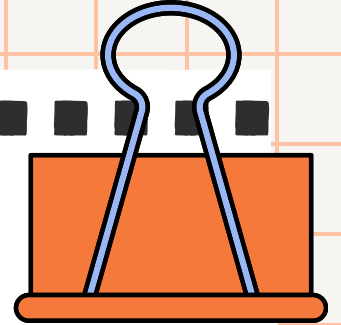
A guide for families



How to use this guide

You don't need to read the whole guide before having a go:

- **New to Food Labs?** Begin with [Section 1](#).
- **Ready to try it at home?** [Sections 2, 5](#) and [6](#) cover getting ready, choosing an activity and deciding what to explore next.
- **Want help keeping food exploration relaxed?** Go to [Section 3](#).
- **Worried about your child's eating?** Read [Section 4](#).
- **Want to get into character as a food scientist?** Find extras to print and use in [Section 7](#).



1. Welcome to Food Labs

Food Labs starts with a simple idea: children need time and space to explore food in their own way.

1.1. What is Food Labs?

Food Labs is a playful, hands-on approach that helps children and families become more curious and confident around food.

Through simple experiments, children become ‘food scientists’. They might compare colours and textures, investigate smells, listen to different sounds or notice what happens when a food is cut, crushed, mixed or warmed.

Children can explore through sight, smell, touch and sound, and taste if they choose. The aim is not to persuade them to eat, but to help foods feel more interesting, familiar and manageable, one small step at a time.



1.2. Why exploration comes first

Mealtimes are not always the easiest place for children to get to know unfamiliar foods. At a meal, there is usually an expectation that food will be eaten. For a cautious child, even gentle encouragement can make the experience feel like a test.

Children may be cautious around food for lots of reasons. A food might look unfamiliar, have an unpredictable texture or smell stronger than expected. Some children, including many neurodivergent children, experience tastes, textures, smells and appearances particularly strongly. This does not mean your child is being difficult and it is not a sign that you have done anything wrong.

Research suggests that repeated, low-pressure exploration can help children become more comfortable around food. Food Labs creates opportunities beyond mealtimes for children to investigate food while feeling safe and in control. They can explore how it looks, smells, feels and sounds without being expected to taste it. Mealtimes still matter, but they do not have to do all the work of building familiarity.

A child may need to explore a food 10–15 times, or even more, before they feel ready to taste it. There is no set timetable: looking, smelling, touching or simply allowing the food to be nearby can all help build familiarity.

1.3 What progress can look like

In Food Labs, success is not measured by whether your child eats the food. Progress might look like:

- looking at an unfamiliar food with interest
- watching somebody else prepare or explore it
- allowing the food to be nearby
- touching it with a finger, fork or utensil
- smelling it for the first time
- describing its colour, shape, smell or texture
- having a relaxed conversation about it
- choosing to taste it
- returning to explore it another day

These are not steps that your child has to complete in order. They may explore more on one day and less on another. Each relaxed experience can help an unfamiliar food become more familiar.



2. Bringing Food Labs to life at home

Food Labs activities are designed to be simple and flexible: you can try a complete activity or spend just a few minutes exploring food together as a family.

2.1. Before you begin



Most Food Labs activities use everyday foods and basic kitchen equipment. You don't need to buy food specially or choose perfect-looking ingredients. Clean, safe fruit and vegetable offcuts, such as peelings and stalks, and wonky produce can be ideal for activities where tasting is not the goal. This can help keep costs down and give food that might otherwise go to waste another use.

Before you begin:

- read through your chosen activity and gather what you need
- check ingredients for allergies and dietary requirements
- wash hands and clean any surfaces you will use
- supervise knives, peelers, heat and other equipment
- adapt your child's role to suit their age, confidence and abilities
- plan how to store or use any suitable unused ingredients afterwards

For children who enjoy getting into character, Section 7 includes food scientist goggles, a Food Lab access pass and an experiment chart to print and use.

There is no set amount of time a Food Lab should take and you do not need to complete the whole activity. A short, enjoyable experience is more valuable than continuing when your child has had enough.

2.2 A Food Lab in action

Each activity in Section 5 begins with a research question to share with your child. Use these five steps as a flexible guide rather than a checklist you need to complete:

1. Share the question

Read the research question aloud or put it into your own words. For example: *Can you change how a food smells?*

2. Predict together

Ask your child what they think might happen and share your own ideas too. There are no wrong answers.

3. Test and tinker

Use the activity guidance to investigate the question together. Invite your child to look, smell, touch, chop, squash, mix or taste, depending on the experiment and how they choose to join in.

4. Notice what happens

Pause to look for changes and talk about what you both notice. Focus on what your child discovers rather than whether they taste or eat anything.

5. Reflect together

Ask what surprised them, what they might change and what they would like to explore next. They might want to repeat the experiment, try something different or stop there. All of these are valid choices.

Ready to begin? Skip to [Section 5](#) and choose an activity that appeals to your child.

Want more guidance first? Continue to [Section 3](#) for practical ways to keep food exploration relaxed and child-led.



3. Creating relaxed, child-led exploration

Small changes to how you respond, talk and join in can help your child feel safe and in control while they explore.

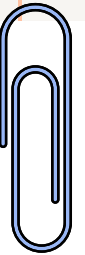
3.1 Keep it low-pressure

Children are more likely to explore when they do not feel judged, watched or pushed.

During the activity:

- keep the focus on exploring rather than eating
- let your child choose whether and how they join in
- give them time and space to investigate at their own pace
- accept every response, including dislike
- let them pause, move away or try a different role
- avoid using praise, rewards or bargaining to encourage eating
- treat looking, touching, smelling and experimenting as valuable outcomes in their own right

If an activity is not working, move on without making it a big moment. Your child can always return to it another time.



3.2 Talk like a food scientist

The way you talk can help put this low-pressure approach into practice. Use neutral, curious language that draws attention to what your child can investigate, without suggesting there is a right response.

Instead of...	Try...
"Do you like it?"	"What do you notice about it?"
"Just try one bite."	"You can choose how you explore it."
"Well done for eating that!"	"You found out something new about that food."
"This is delicious."	"This one feels crunchy to me."
"Cut it like this."	"What happens if we cut it in different ways?"

Questions you could ask include:

- What can you smell?
- How does it feel?
- Does it make a sound?
- What is different inside?
- What else could we try?

These questions are prompts rather than a checklist. Follow your child's lead: a question might spark their curiosity, but sometimes quiet time to investigate is just as valuable.

3.3 Model curiosity

Children learn a lot by watching the adults around them. Research suggests that seeing an adult engage with an unfamiliar food can help children feel more willing to approach it themselves.

Modelling curiosity is not about showing your child the 'right' response. It is about letting them see how you investigate something unfamiliar.

Join in as a fellow food scientist, rather than directing the activity from the sidelines. As you do, describe what you genuinely notice:

- "This side feels rougher than the other."
- "I wonder whether it will smell stronger if I tear it."
- "That was different from what I expected."

Joining in may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first – and that's okay. You don't need to act out a character – simply start by saying what you notice. Keep your reactions honest and low-key. Let your child see that adults do not always know the answer, enjoy every food or make the right prediction.

This shows that Food Labs is about discovering what happens, not performing or reaching a particular conclusion.



4. When additional support may help

Food Labs can support everyday food exploration, but some children may need more specialist help.

4.1 When to seek additional support

Speak to a GP or another health professional if your child:

- eats a very limited range of foods
- experiences strong fear, anxiety or distress around food
- avoids entire food groups or types of texture
- has eating difficulties that affect their growth, nutrition or energy
- finds eating an ongoing source of conflict or distress

These experiences are not the same as typical picky eating. In some cases, they may be connected to Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) or another eating difficulty that needs specialist assessment and support.

Food Labs is not a replacement for individual advice from a qualified health professional.

4.2 Where to find help

You could speak to your GP or another professional who supports your child, such as a health visitor or school nurse. Further information is also available from:

- [NHS Hampshire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service \(CAMHS\)](#)

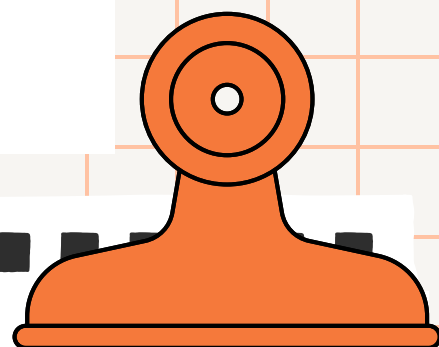
Practical guidance on recognising different eating difficulties (including ARFID), understanding underlying causes, and how to access specialist support in Hampshire.

- [Public Health Hampshire – children, young people and families](#)

General advice and support on children's health and wellbeing available in the local area.

- [Young Minds](#)

A national charity supporting children and young people's mental health, including information and support relating to ARFID and eating difficulties.



5. Choosing an activity

You're ready to begin experimenting. Each activity includes a research question to share with your child and simple guidance to help you explore it together.

5.1 Find a place to start

Every child explores differently. Some prefer to watch and notice, while others enjoy touching, creating, moving or being outdoors.

The activities are grouped by the kind of exploration they invite:

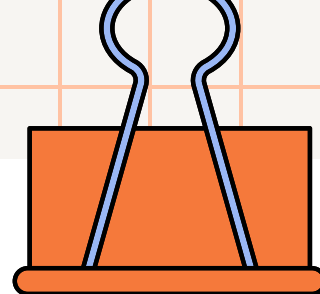
- **Watch and wonder:** gentle experiments based on smelling, looking and noticing changes
- **Touch and transform:** hands-on activities for children who enjoy sensory or creative play
- **Build and move:** active challenges involving construction, movement and problem-solving
- **Grow and discover:** activities for children who enjoy nature, outdoor exploration or watching changes over time

Start wherever feels most comfortable or interesting for your child today. There is no set order: you can move between activities, return to one your child enjoyed or skip anything that does not appeal to you. Repeating an activity can be valuable, as each positive experience helps food feel a little more familiar.

Before you begin: consider allergies and dietary requirements, wash hands and surfaces and supervise any heat, sharp equipment, raw eggs or small pieces of food.



5.2 Watch and wonder



If your child prefers to watch before joining in, these activities offer a gentle starting point. They can watch you carry out each step and decide whether they would like to become more involved.

Research Question	Activity
Can you change how a food smells?	Choose an aromatic herb, a piece of fruit or some peel. Invite your child to smell it as it is, then help them compare what happens when it is rubbed, torn, crushed, grated or gently warmed. Ask which action they think releases the strongest smell. An adult should take charge of grating and warming.
Can lemon change the colour of other foods?	Choose one or both experiments: 1 - Apple experiment: place small pieces of apple in lemon juice, water or nothing. Ask your child to predict what will happen, then observe the pieces together over time. 2 - Cabbage experiment: cook noodles in water with red cabbage. Once they are cool enough to handle, invite your child to add a little lemon juice to some of the noodles and compare them. Ask what they notice and whether anything surprises them.
Can an egg lose its shell?	Place two raw eggs in separate covered containers: one containing white vinegar and the other water. Invite your child to predict what might happen, then observe the eggs together over 24–48 hours. What changes can they see? How do the eggs compare? An adult should handle the raw eggs, everyone should wash their hands afterwards and the eggs should not be eaten.



5.3 Touch and transform

These activities invite your child to squash, squeeze, shape and create. Let them decide whether to use their hands, a spoon or another utensil to explore.

Research question	Activity
Can custard be both a solid and a liquid?	Help your child mix four measures of custard powder or cornflour with one measure of water. Use ordinary custard powder, not instant custard mix. Add a little more water at a time and invite them to explore how the mixture moves and feels. Does it flow? Can they form it into a ball? What happens when they squeeze it?
Can you make art from leftovers?	Offer your child clean, safe food scraps such as peels, herb stalks or untouched pieces of food. You could give them an outline, such as a funny face or creature, to complete or invite them to create their own picture or sculpture. Food used for artwork should not be eaten afterwards.
Can you turn other food into your favourite?	Ask your child to choose a favourite food and describe it together. What shape, size and colour is it? Then challenge them to search the kitchen for other foods with something in common. If they choose chips, which other foods could be cut into long strips? Can they find anything with a similar colour? Let your child choose which similarities to investigate, then help them cut, shape or arrange the foods to create their own versions.

5.4 Build and move

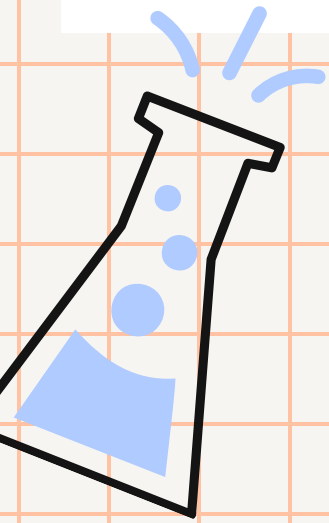
These activities may appeal to children who enjoy movement, construction or a challenge. The focus can stay entirely on building and experimenting, with no expectation to taste the food.

Research question	Activity
Which foods make the tallest tower?	Cut foods into different shapes and sizes, choosing pieces that are appropriate for your child's age. Invite them to predict which pieces will stack most easily, then encourage them to build and rebuild their tower. What happens when they change the shape, size or order of the pieces? Keep the ingredients clean if you plan to eat or cook them afterwards.
Which food rolls fastest?	Choose larger round foods such as oranges, lemons, apples or potatoes. Help your child make a ramp and ask them to predict which food will reach the bottom first. Try changing the height or surface of the ramp and testing the foods again. Does their size, shape or texture make a difference?

5.5 Grow and discover

These activities take food exploration beyond the kitchen. They may suit children who enjoy nature, outdoor activities or returning to an experiment over several days.

Research question	Activity
Can we grow new food from leftovers?	Help your child place the base of a vegetable such as a spring onion, lettuce or celery in a shallow dish of water. Put it somewhere light and change the water regularly. Encourage your child to measure, draw or photograph what changes each day. If you try more than one vegetable, which begins growing first?
Can you find your own food?	Explore a garden or local green space with your child and look for familiar foods or plants that produce food. Encourage them to photograph or draw what they find. The aim is to spot, not taste. Do not allow children to pick or eat wild food unsupervised. Only collect something when you have permission and an experienced adult can identify it with complete certainty. Never taste unidentified plants, berries or fungi. If in doubt, leave it where it is.



6. Next steps

At the end of an experiment, take a moment to notice what happened and let your child's curiosity guide what comes next.

6.1 Reflect together

An experiment does not need to end with a taste. When your child is ready to finish, take a moment to notice what happened and wonder what could come next.

You could ask:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- What would you change if you tried it again?
- What would you like to investigate next?

There are no right answers. Noticing, wondering and choosing how to take part are all part of the experiment.

If your child would like to keep a record, they can use the experiment chart in Section 7 to note what they explored and what they might like to investigate next.

6.2 Keep exploring

Follow your child's curiosity: repeat an experiment they enjoyed, try something new or investigate a question of your own. Each relaxed experience can help food feel a little more familiar.

For more ways to build food confidence together, explore the Food Labs homepage. You can also find recipe cards and other food-based resources on [Hampshire County Council's website](#).

7. Appendix: Printable Extras

This section contains optional printables to help your child get into character, record their discoveries and celebrate their Food Labs experiences.

7.1 Getting into character

Help your child step into their role as a food scientist with a lab access pass and a pair of food scientist goggles.

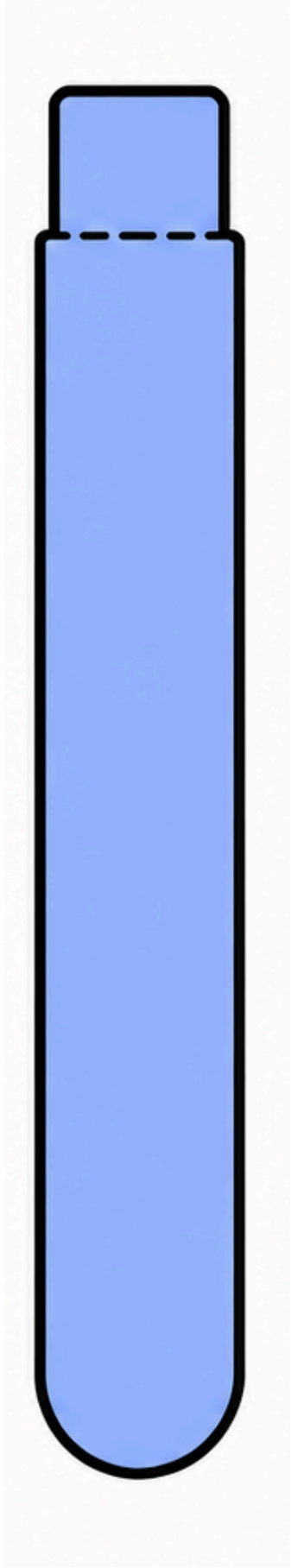
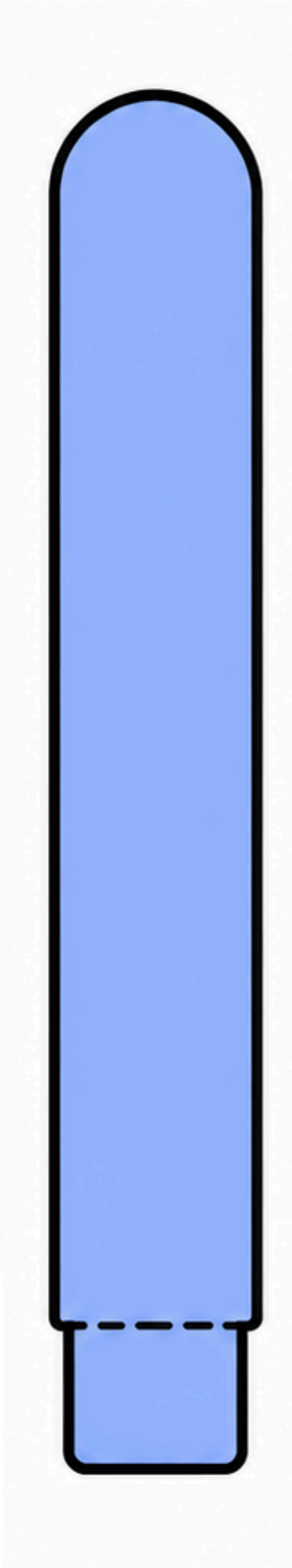
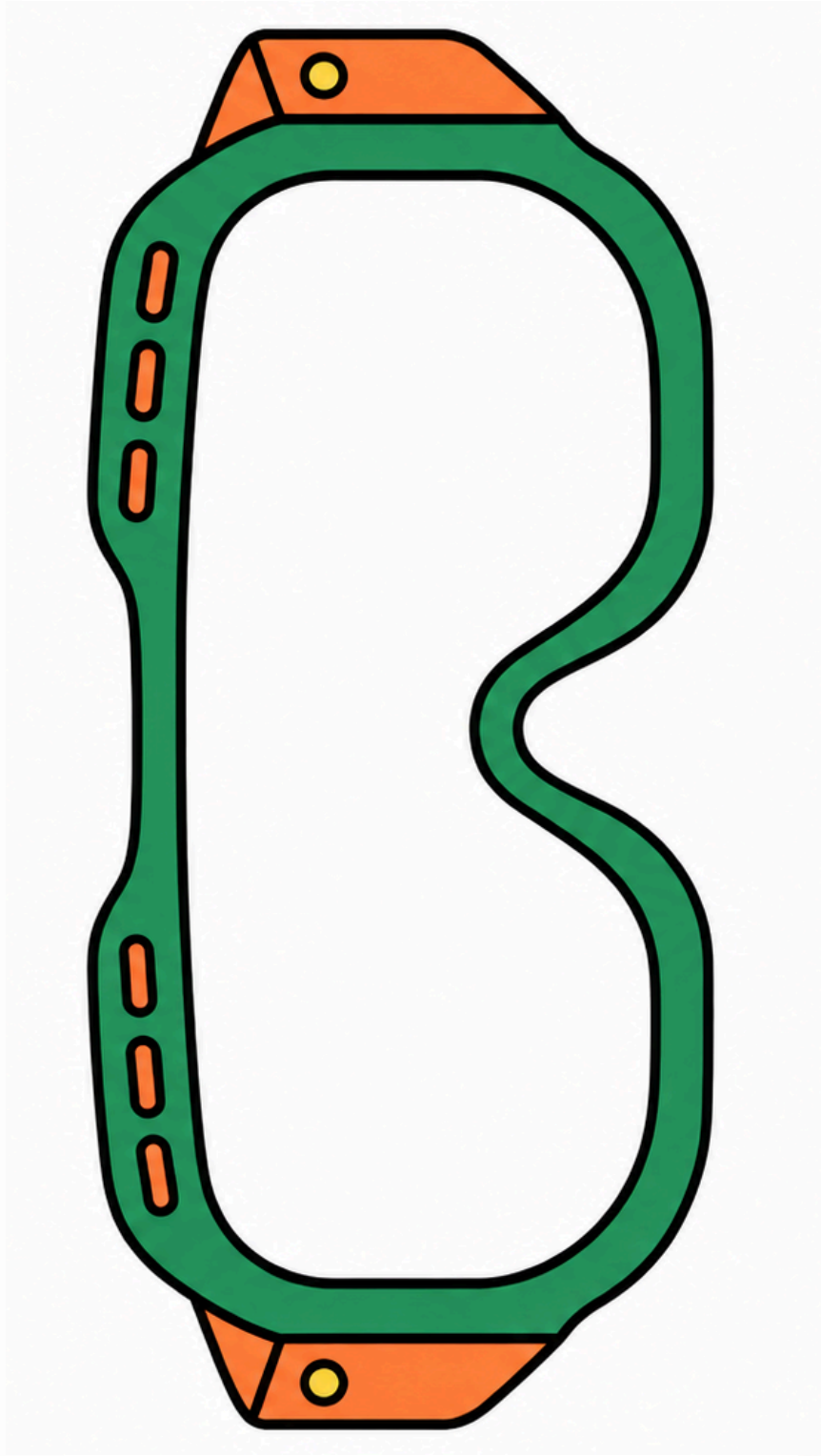
1. Print the page overleaf (page 16) and stick it to a piece of thin recycled card.
2. Cut out the pass, goggles and straps by following their outer black outlines. Carefully cut out the white visor area inside the goggles.
3. Fold the tabs along the dotted lines and attach one strap to each side of the goggles using tape or glue. Ask your child to hold the goggles over their eyes while you bring one strap around each side of their head so that the ends overlap at the back. Mark where they overlap, remove the goggles and tape the straps together at this point.
4. Pop the access pass into a lanyard card holder, or tape a length of ribbon to the back so your child can wear it around their neck.

7.2 Keeping track and celebrating

Each experiment is a chance for your child to notice something new. We have included:

- a lab experiment log to use alongside any activity and jot down what your child explored and noticed (page 17). You could print it and put it somewhere visible, such as on the fridge, so your child can see what they have discovered and feel encouraged to explore again.
- a food scientist certificate to celebrate their curiosity and discoveries (page 18).





Food Labs Experiment Log

Name: _____ Date: _____



1. My prediction

What are we exploring today? What do you think might happen?
Write or draw your ideas.



2. What I noticed

What did you notice with your senses?

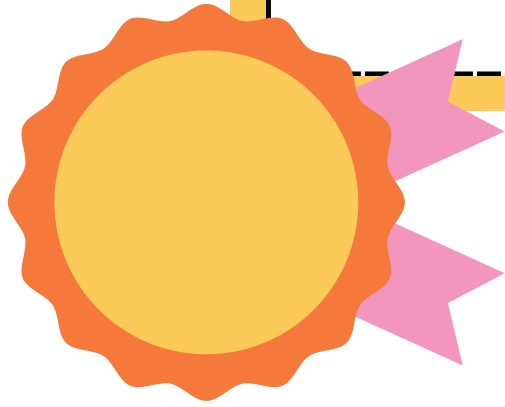
3. Something that surprised me was...



4. Something I enjoyed doing today was...

FOOD LABS

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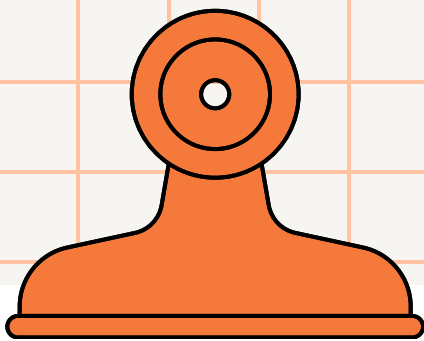


Awarded to:

For:

- curious exploring
- brilliant noticing
- great questions
- taking part in your own way





**ROSE HARVEY
& CO**



Working with
Hampshire
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