From Food Skills to Food Literacy

What does “Food Skills” mean?
“Food skills” means more than cooking or being able to follow a recipe. In Public Health in Ontario, it is defined as a set of different skills, including:

- **Knowledge**: Our understanding of what is in the food we eat, where food comes from, how to read a food label, how different foods go together in a healthy way, and how to handle and store food safely.
- **Planning**: How we go about planning and preparing meals: what to make; when to make it; where to get or access our ingredients and/or food; what tools and appliances we need; how much money we need; putting it all together; and making time to eat and enjoy the food.
- **Conceptualizing**: How we improve recipes and make good use of leftover food.
- **Mechanical Techniques**: How we use different tools and techniques from chopping and mixing to cooking and storing.
- **Food Perception**: How we use our senses: The texture of the food/meal; the taste of the food; the flavouring of the food; and if the food is safe and ready to eat.

Why Food Skills are Important?
Food manufacturers have changed food to become more convenient for consumers. There are more pre-packaged/"boxed", processed and “fast” foods available and being eaten. Many adults work outside the home and their busy lifestyles result in preparing and cooking less food at home. As a result, food skills have declined over time. Food skills connect to healthy eating, so it is important these skills do not continue to decline.
What is “Food Literacy”?  
When we think of “literacy”, we usually think of reading and writing. “Food Literacy” is a broad term and, like food skills, has different parts to it. Having food skills is one key part of food literacy. A person's food literacy level will depend on both the individual and the environment. For the individual, along with food skills, it means if they are able to use and follow a recipe; how they feel about preparing food; their past experience with preparing food; and if they have the confidence to use their food skills and be creative with what they have on hand. There are many things to consider in the environment including:

**Learning environment:** Are people able to learn at home, school or in the community? Is there “hands on” type of learning? Do they have opportunities to learn through “hands on”?

**Access to Food:** What kinds of foods are close by? Is healthy food easy to get and is it affordable?

**Living conditions:** Are there enough resources like income and affordable housing? Is there enough money to buy healthy food after paying for housing, utilities, transportation, childcare, etc.? Do people have access to cooking tools, appliances and places to cook?

**Social Support Networks:** Is there support from family and friends to learn and share food skills? Are there opportunities to share food skills in a meaningful way with others?

*(access to learning, food, facilities, equipment, income)*

Why is Food Literacy Important?
Food Literacy helps us plan, prepare, and cook healthy, tasty, affordable meals for ourselves and our families. Food Literacy can be affected by many different things. It’s not just about the individual. Our surrounding environment impacts food literacy too. For example, a person can have advanced food skills but not have the money to buy ingredients or the motivation to prepare food because they live alone. A person may have minimum food skills but not have the opportunity to grow or build these skills.

It is important that we work together to ensure our environments promote food literacy, so that we continue to make healthy and safe food choices more easily and throughout our lives. Starting early and targeting school age children and youth is also important. Research shows that confidence in the kitchen was higher with youth and young adults who learned food skills earlier in life. Also, young parents who have poor food skills want to learn and improve these skills to pass them on to their children.

We can increase efforts to persuade and collaborate with government, school boards, community members and other interested parties/agencies to include food literacy in schools and in community programming. Along with teaching students how to prepare food, funds are also needed for food, equipment, and space. Funds and working partnerships are needed to train school staff and community members to deliver hands on learning and provide accurate
and reliable information about healthy eating and safe food handling. There are many factors to consider when promoting food literacy.

By promoting and working with the broader definition of food literacy, people will have greater opportunity to develop, improve or enhance their own food skills. People who are able to learn, share, and use their food skills only become more resilient or stronger in their ability to make safe and healthy eating choices.