Kids in the Kitchen

Your kitchen is a learning laboratory for your kids. It's where they learn about food shopping, cooking and cleanup. These are life skills which will help them become self-sufficient later in life.

Ways That Children Learn Best
Children learn best when they are interested in what they are doing and are actively involved. Kids learn by touching, tasting, feeling, smelling, and listening. They are naturally curious about food and cooking, and food preparation allows them to use all their senses. When they are mixing, stirring, kneading, spreading, tossing, squeezing, and pouring, they are learning without realizing it.

Benefits of Cooking With Children
Cooking allows kids to feel good about themselves. They have a sense of pride when they prepare foods to eat and share with others. Kids who help with the planning and preparation of meals also are more likely to try new foods.

However, cooking with kids takes time, patience, and can be very messy. Remember that the food may not taste or look as good as you think it should, but many experts think it is well worth the effort.

Let kids help with the full process from shopping to setting the table to cooking. Start at the grocery store. Teach them what to look for on nutrition labels. Show them what is low in fat and high in fiber, vitamins and minerals. Help them find out how much sugar or salt is in processed foods. Whether they realize it or not, they're learning about important nutrients and a variety of foods at the same time.

Teach older kids to read a recipe all the way through, clean the counters and their hands, set up the work area with all utensils that will be needed, and gather all ingredients before starting to cook.

They should prepare all ingredients that must be chopped, peeled, toasted, etc. so that the cooking process goes smoothly and quickly. Being organized helps them feel good about themselves.

Kids are eager to lend a hand. Letting them help you out in the kitchen says "You are a big help, you can do this, and you are important!" This far outweighs any drawbacks. For example, small children may not be able to lift heavy pots, pans and bowls to clean them, but that can be part of the fun!

Here are some of the short-term and long-term payoffs of cooking with kids.

Short-term Benefits:
- Kids are encouraged to try healthy foods at which they might normally turn up their noses.
- Kids feel a sense of accomplishment and feel that they are contributing to the family.
- Kids are more likely to sit down to a family meal that they helped prepare.
- Kids spend time cooking rather than watching TV or sitting in front of the computer.
- Kids generally skip the junk food when they cook a meal at home.
- Kids spend quality time with their parents.

Long-term Benefits:
- Kids learn a skill they can use for the rest of their lives.
- Kids learn to eat well and may be more likely to eat healthfully as adults.
- Kids gain self-confidence through positive cooking experiences.
- Kids who cook with their parents may be less likely to abuse drugs.
**Food Preparation is Practical Science**

Cooking involves many learning skills besides how to handle and prepare foods and how to keep food safe to eat. It also teaches children:

- vocabulary words and reading skills—while a recipe is read, followed and prepared.
- math skills—when counting, measuring and following step-by-step directions.
- science—seeing how food changes during cooking. (e.g. dough rising, sugar dissolving in water, and eggs coagulating.)
- decision-making skills—choosing and eating nutritious foods.
- similarities and differences in foods of other cultures—as they prepare dishes from a variety of cultural groups.
- comparisons and associations in food preparation—Adding too much flour results in dry, hard cookies, and doubling the ingredients in a cookie recipe yields twice as many cookies.
- social skills—working together with others, taking turns and solving problems, which boosts self-esteem.

**Age-appropriate Kitchen Jobs**

Food preparation activities help kids develop small-muscle movement and eye-hand coordination.

Always consider the age of the child and assign jobs they can safely do. Every child is different, so consider the developmental level and abilities of each one when assigning kitchen duties. Choose foods and recipes that match their abilities. Here are some age-appropriate kitchen jobs for children.

**Babies:** Although babies can't help with the cooking, they enjoy being with their parent or caregiver and experiencing the sights, sounds and smells of the kitchen. Talk to them about what you are doing as you move around the kitchen. Tell them about the foods you're preparing and the utensils you're using.

Leave babies in their high chair or another safe place, even after they begin to crawl. Give them a separate bowl and spoon and let them mix foods that are safe for them to eat.

**Age 2:** Two-year-olds are learning to use the large muscles in their arms and can help with these activities:

- wiping table tops.
- moving premeasured ingredients from one place to another.
- playing with utensils.
- snapping fresh beans.
- breaking cauliflower or bread for stuffing.
- rinsing and tearing lettuce and salad greens.
- scrubbing and dipping vegetables and fruits.

**Age 3:** This age level is learning to use their hands and can manage all of the above, plus jobs such as:

- pouring liquids into a batter.
- mixing ingredients such as muffin batter. (Use an extra large bowl to contain mess.)
- shaking a milk drink in a covered container.
- spreading soft spreads, such as peanut butter on firm bread. (This may be messy!)
- kneading dough and simple shaping.
- wrapping potatoes in foil for baking.
- putting trash in the garbage can.

**Ages 4 - 5:** Kids in this age group are learning to control smaller muscles in their fingers, so offer experiences such as:

- setting the table.
- mashing soft fruits (bananas) and cooked vegetables with a fork.
- rolling bananas in cereal for a snack.
- forming rounds shapes with hands.
- measuring dry and liquid ingredients.
- peeling loose-skinned oranges and hard-cooked eggs.
- beating eggs with an eggbeater or whisk.
- cutting parsley, green onions or dried fruits with dull scissors.
- cutting with a blunt knife (e.g. fruit on a cutting board).

**Ages 6 - 8:** This age level has mastered all of the previous jobs and is ready to learn tasks such as:

- cleaning surfaces before and after use.
- gathering utensils and ingredients.
- greasing or spraying baking pans.
- light chopping.
- peeling onions and garlic.
- grating cheese.
- opening cans.
- washing fruits and vegetables.
• advanced measuring (e.g. measuring liquids and spooning dry ingredients into measuring cup and leveling off).
• kneading dough.
• breaking eggs.
• melting butter.
• crushing crackers in a bag with a rolling pin.
• washing dishes and putting away ingredients and utensils.

Ages 9 - 12: Children at this age level still need adult supervision, but they can manage jobs such as:
• planning and preparing simple meals and snacks.
• following a recipe, measuring accurately and preparing a product.
• reading and interpreting ingredient and food labels.
• operating small appliances like blenders, mini-choppers, juicers, and microwave ovens.
• moderate chopping, dicing and cutting.
• sautéing and pan frying.
• steaming, broiling, boiling and baking.
• handling and storing ingredients and finished products safely.
• cleaning up, knowing how and what to hand wash or wash in the dishwasher.

Teens: By adolescence, kids are making most of their own decisions about food and are capable of:
• performing tasks that require multiple preparation steps or close timing.
• creating new flavor combinations, shapes or decoration.
• planning and preparing whole menus for meals or entertaining.
• making shopping lists and shopping for ingredients.
• helping younger children learn about food and how to prepare it.
• enjoying cooking with peers.

Kitchen Safety Tips
Teach kids how to handle food to keep it clean and safe from spoilage and foodborne illness. Show them how to clean up as they are cooking, to use clean dish towels and paper towels. Teach them how to store food properly for food safety.

Cooking is fun and safe if kids know these basic kitchen safety tips.
• Wash hands with soap and water before, during and after handling food, and then dry them well.
• Clean all counter tops and utensils after every use.
• Use clean utensils for different foods, especially items like cutting boards and knives that have come in contact with raw meats, poultry, fish or eggs. Use a meat thermometer, also.
• Always have adult supervision when working with hot liquids, knives, the stove and other potentially dangerous equipment. If you are under the age of 10, you should not handle the stove, electrical appliances, sharp utensils or hot dishes.
• Use pot holders when handling hot pans, pots and dishes.
• Follow the rules set by parents or caregivers, even if they are not present. For example, don't use the oven when at home alone.
• Learn how to use a microwave oven safely. If you are too young to read the controls on the front, then you're too young to operate a microwave oven without adult supervision.
• Never leave a hot stove unattended. When using the stove, be careful so that long hair and large, loose-fitting clothes don't catch fire. It's safer not to wear loose-fitting clothes in the kitchen and to pin up long hair.
• Turn pot handles toward the back of the stove, and cook on back burners whenever possible.
• Keep hot foods and liquids away from the edges of counters and tables.
• In case of fire, "stop, drop and roll" to smother the flames. Learn how to use the fire extinguisher.
• If you must climb to get food and utensils that are stored out of reach, always use a sturdy stool. Never climb on the counters or on a wobbling stool.
• Use the kitchen first-aid kit for minor cooking injuries.
• Call 911, or emergency numbers such as the family doctor, fire department, poison control center, police, a neighbor or a
relative. These important phone numbers should be posted in the kitchen in plain view.

- Learn ways to avoid choking. Practice the Heimlich maneuver, which could save the life of someone who is choking.

Books That Encourage Children to Cook

Books can inspire, teach and delight children of all ages. Illustrated children's cookbooks show the foods, measurements, and steps to follow in preparing the recipes.

Here are a few examples of books that encourage kids to cook.

- *Pancakes for Breakfast* by Tomie Depaola
- *Little Red Hen* by Paul Galdone
- *Stone Soup* by Heather Forest
- *Betty Crocker Kids Cook!* by Betty Crocker
- *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* by Judi Barrett
- *Pretend Soup and Other Real Recipes: a Cookbook for Preschoolers & up* by Mollie Katzen
- *Someone's in the Kitchen with Mommy* by Elaine Magee

- *Williams-Sonoma Kids Cooking: Scrumptious Recipes for Cooks Ages 9 to 13*
- *Cooking with Children* (for age 7 and up) by Marion Cunningham

Sources:

1. Kunkel, M. Elizabeth. *How to Get Children Cooking*. Nourishing News (December 2002), Clemson University Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition and EFNEP.

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