



## Cooking with Children

Parents, grandparents, and youngsters cooking together in the kitchen, sharing family recipes and secrets passed from one generation to the next. These days, it's hard for busy parents even to take time out to teach their kids basic cooking techniques.

It's true that cooking with children requires time, patience, and some extra cleanup, especially when the children are younger. But many experts think it is well worth the effort.

For one thing, cooking with children can help get them interested in trying healthy foods they might normally turn up their noses at. Susan Moores, MS, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, says she has seen this happen countless times.

It's true kids will be kids -- they'll snack on chips at a school party or enjoy ice cream after a soccer game. But what is most important is how they eat most of the time, Moores says. And that's where parents can play a role. Keep in mind that for kids today, healthy eating essentially means eating more fruits and vegetables, having whole grains and beans when possible, and choosing leaner types of animal foods (even some fish every now and then.)

Encouraging kids to try healthier foods isn't the only benefit of cooking as a family. Among the recommendations in a recent American Heart Association report on overweight problems in children and teens were:

- Reducing the number of meals eaten outside the home.
- Having structured times for family meals.
- Offering healthier, low-calorie foods.
- Involving children in meal planning, shopping, and food preparation.

Indeed, cooking with children can be the gift that keeps on giving; it has both short-term and long-term payoffs.

### Some of the short-term benefits:

- It encourages kids to try healthy foods.
- Kids feel like they are accomplishing something and contributing to the family.
- Kids are more likely to sit down to a family meal when they helped prepare it.

- Parents get to spend quality time with their kids.
- Kids aren't spending time in front of the TV or computer while they're cooking.
- Kids generally aren't eating junk food when they're cooking a meal at home.

Some long-term benefits:

- Learning to cook is a skill your children can use for the rest of their lives.
- Kids who learn to eat well may be more likely to eat healthfully as adults.
- Positive cooking experiences can help build self-confidence.
- Kids who cook with their parents may even be less likely to abuse drugs.

**How to Start Cooking with Children**

One good place to start is the first meal of the day: breakfast. Evidence suggests eating breakfast improves memory and test grades (some elements of a healthy breakfast are high-fiber and nutrient-rich whole grains, fruits, and dairy products).

Pressed for time in the morning? Start cooking breakfast with your kids on the weekends, during the summer months, or on school holidays.

For many of us, dinner offers the best opportunity for cooking with our children day in and day out. One tip: Set out some washed and sliced fruits and vegetables to munch on, and nutritious or zero-calorie beverages to sip while you're cooking. This means the children (and you!) will be less likely to nibble on the dinner ingredients while you work.

And just how old do your children have to be to help out in the kitchen? Many start to express an interest in cooking at around 2 or 3, and that's not too early to start.

Especially for younger children, it's important to set your kids up for success. Structure the work area so they are less likely to spill. You can also have them do their measuring with a jellyroll pan underneath to catch any spills.

Remember that the easier dishes are to prepare, the more likely the kids will try making them again. Start with things like breads, muffins, pasta, and fun sandwiches.

Here are some age-appropriate cooking skills your children should be able to master.

**Under 5 Years Old:**

Scrub, dip, tear, break, and snap (for example, snapping the ends off green beans)  
 Shake, spread, and cut with a cookie or biscuit cutter.  
 Peel (some items), roll, juice, and mash.  
 Remove husks from corn.  
 Wash vegetables in a colander.  
 Measure and pour some ingredients.  
 Hand Mix.

**8-10 Years Old:**

Everything listed above, plus some more advanced duties, such as:  
 Cracking and separating eggs.  
 Reading some recipes by themselves.  
 Inventing their own easy-to-fix recipes.  
 Using the electric mixer (with adult supervision).  
 Stirring food over the stove (with adult supervision).

Using and reading a candy thermometer (with adult supervision if needed).  
Operating a can opener or food processor with safety features.  
Grating cheese.  
Cutting vegetables, fruits, etc. using a plastic knife or dinner knife.

(Source: Webmd.com)