

Healthy Connections: Cooking with Kids at Every Age

FACT SHEET

2027 Annual Lesson Series

Introduction

Cooking as a family can do more than prepare a healthy meal; it can build life skills, strengthen family connections, improve fine motor skills, help kids improve reading and math abilities, and can offer many additional benefits that support children's overall development.

As with starting any new sport, activity, or hobby, it is important to introduce cooking skills intentionally and choose tasks that match a child's age and developmental abilities. By focusing on age-appropriate tasks, you can ease concerns you may have and help your child develop lifelong skills through cooking.



Safety and Skills

Introducing kids to cooking is a great way to teach food safety, kitchen safety, and important life skills. When you teach with patience and purpose, cooking can become a fun way to spend time together while making meals for your family.

- **Put safety first.** Talk to your child about kitchen rules. Teach them about hot surfaces, sharp tools, and which appliances they can and cannot use. Turn the pot and pan handles toward the back of the stove to prevent burns.
- **Wash hands often.** Show your child how to wash their hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds. Hands should be washed before cooking and after each task. Explain that clean hands keep people healthy and help keep the food safe to eat.
- **Teach tasks step-by-step.** Show your child how to do each job safely, like cutting, stirring, or measuring. After teaching a task, let your child try it while you supervise. Never leave children alone in the kitchen.

- **Encourage and praise.** Thank your child for helping and acknowledge what they did well. Positive feedback helps them feel confident and excited to keep learning.
- **Be patient and flexible.** Cooking with kids may take more time and create more mess, but it also builds skills they can use later in life. Start by giving your child small tasks and, as their skills develop, let them try new things. More hands in the kitchen can mean sharing tasks and promoting teamwork.

Healthier Dietary Intake

Letting kids help pick recipes, choose produce at the store, and prepare meals may help them consume more vegetables and be more willing to try new foods. Involving children in meal planning and preparation decisions also builds independent thinking and problem-solving skills. Ask simple questions that help them make balanced choices, practice communication, and strengthen decision-making skills.

- What food could we add to include another food group with our meal?
- What could we add to make this meal more colorful?

- Did you like this recipe? What could we change next time?
- Is there anything new you would like to try?

Cooking to Learn

Cooking can help kids practice important skills like counting, fractions, reading, and measuring.

- Use the time in the kitchen to build these skills by asking questions such as, “If we don’t have a ½ cup measuring cup, how else could we measure ½ cup?” or “If the recipe calls for 1 cup and we want to double it, how much do we need?”
- Let your child help write the grocery list and read recipes as you cook to strengthen their vocabulary and reading abilities.
- Bring your child to the grocery store and let them help pick out produce, find items on your list, or check off items as you put them in the cart.

Like other tasks, these moments create opportunities to learn in fun and meaningful ways.

Learning tasks in the kitchen can be a shared experience for both the child and the adult. Explore new skills together by watching simple how-to videos as a family, such as those on Cooking with Kids, <https://cookingwithkids.org/resources-old/how-to-videos-english/>. Celebrate your success by enjoying the meal together as a family. Sharing meals can strengthen emotional bonds, improve communication, encourage healthier eating habits, and support overall family well-being. Cooking together as a family is not only about preparing meals; it helps children feel valued and connected, builds their confidence and capability, and increases their willingness to try new foods, especially produce that they have had a hand in washing, chopping, or seasoning.

Age-Appropriate Kitchen Tasks for Skill and Confidence Development

Children’s age and fine motor skills should guide which kitchen tasks they can safely try. Start with simple tasks and modify them as needed. For example, if a child struggles to mash a banana for banana bread, place the banana in a food-safe bag so they can mash it easily. Using child-friendly tools, like plastic-blade cooking knives, can also help build confidence and skills. When teaching a new task, provide close guidance and supervision until the child demonstrates they can do it



safely. As they gain experience and skill over time, you can slowly allow more independence.

Want to get your kids involved in the kitchen, but not sure where to start? Check out, Nomster Chef, <https://www.nomsterchef.com/>, for free kid-friendly recipes, videos, and educational materials!

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AGE-APPROPRIATE COOKING TASKS FOR CHILDREN

Age	Appropriate Tasks:
2-3 years	Learn to wash hands in warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds. Washing fruits and vegetables in cool tap water in the sink. Snap green beans or peel bananas. Wipe down countertops.
3-5 years	Stir ingredients such as vegetable dip or pancake batter. Mash cooked potatoes. Brushing healthy oil onto a spaghetti squash with a pastry brush. Break eggs into a bowl and wash hands afterwards.
5-7 Years	Load the dishwasher. Cut herbs or green onions with blunt kitchen shears. Scoop out an avocado that has been cut in half by an adult. Shuck corn.
7-9 years	Use a can opener. Practice using a food thermometer with assistance to avoid burns. Practice basic knife skills using a youth kitchen knife. - https://youtu.be/NS372AyUGwQ?si=C83ZZGWENP1ZvQhJ Beat eggs.
9-12 years	Simmer ingredients on the stovetop. Slice or chop fruits and vegetables. Read and follow a recipe. Completing previously learned tasks, unsupervised as appropriate (using a grater, using an oven or microwave, using a hand mixer measuring, etc.).

Modified from Teaching Kids to Cook

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