

Kids in the Kitchen: Healthy Eating to Last a Lifetime!

Healthy eating research supports, and I certainly agree, that kids belong in the kitchen. Let me encourage you that time in the kitchen with your kids is time well spent! Here are just a few of the many reasons why:

- **The Kitchen as a Classroom:** Think of your kitchen as a fun-filled classroom. Kids can learn so many important skills in the kitchen, such as learning to read and follow instructions; and learning practical math skills such as measuring and fractions. And there's always a science lesson to be found in the kitchen, such as how eggs help to bind recipe ingredients together, and how baking soda helps baked goods to rise.
- **Helps to Build Important Life Skills:** It's important for both boys and girls to learn how a meal is created from start to finish, so they can do it themselves as they get older and eventually leave home. Cooking is truly a skill they will use the rest of their lives. Plus, cooking together affords a wonderful opportunity to teach your kids other important life skills, such as time-management, organizational skills, responsibility and confidence. The lessons to be learned in the kitchen are endless and last a lifetime!
- **Fosters Teamwork, Strong Bonds & Memories to Last a Lifetime:** Preparing a meal with your kids is one of the best ways to foster focused, intentional quality time together. Planning and preparing meals with your kids gives you a wonderful opportunity to talk, laugh and accomplish something together as a team – it's good quality bonding time and it's a wonderful opportunity to build memories that last a lifetime!
- **Provides an Opportunity to Nourish a Healthy Lifestyle:** In the kitchen, in the garden, and even at the market, we have the opportunity to make food come alive for our kids and encourage within them an appreciation for healthy whole foods, as well as help them to develop an understanding of how real food truly nourishes the body. By spending time in the kitchen with our kids, we're passing the baton of healthy eating on to them with the hope that one day they'll pass it on to their own children as well.

Ready to Get Started?

If you're ready to get your kids in the kitchen with you, here are a few helpful tips to make it a smoother process for you and your kids:

- **Be realistic!** It's important to be realistic in your expectations. Plan the cooking session with your child in mind: what his/her interests are, attention-span, skill level, etc. By taking time to plan age-appropriate activities, you'll have much more success at making it fun for your child. And the more fun it is, the more you both will enjoy this time together!
- **Schedule it on your meal plan!** Plan time for meal prep or cooking with your kids on a day when you'll have extra time to spend. Yes, cooking with kids means extra time and extra mess – but think big picture and don't get discouraged! Remember, this is more than just teaching them practical life skills, it's about enjoying time together too!
- **Start off with an easy recipe!** And remember to focus on age-appropriate fun tasks – anything that needs to be shaken, stirred, mashed – kids love that! Have them watch you do a task first, then help them do it once, then let them do it by themselves.
- **Keep the time short & sweet!** Be sensitive to your child's age- and personality-related attention span. For little ones, have all of the ingredients ready ahead of time, so they can jump in and participate without waiting. If boredom sets in, thank them for helping you, and let them play while you finish the meal.

----- Helpful Tips & Ideas for Cooking with Kids of All Ages -----

Cooking with your kids is not only fun and educational, it's also a proven strategy to expand their culinary horizons since children are more likely to eat what they help make. To help you get started, below is a brief outline of just a few of the age-appropriate cooking activities you and your children can enjoy together.

Age 9 months to 2 years

Introduce your wee tots and emerging toddlers to the exciting sights, sounds and smells of the kitchen. For little ones who are mobile, place them in their high chair and give them a separate bowl and spoon to mix foods that are age appropriate for them. Be sure to talk to your babes about what you are doing as they watch you working in the kitchen. Don't underestimate how much their little minds are absorbing during this fun time spent with you!

Ages 2–3

Toddlers and young preschoolers are working on their large and fine motor skills, so it's helpful to stick to simple activities such as:

- wiping table tops
- adding premeasured ingredients to a recipe
- tearing lettuce, snapping beans, washing fruits and veggies
- mixing, stirring and mashing simple ingredients (use an extra large bowl to curtail messes)
- using a cookie cutter or biscuit cutter
- helping to put trash in the trash can

Ages 4–5

Children in this age group are ready to begin the fun of more complex tasks, so offer experiences such as:

- learning to measure dry and liquid ingredients (larger size measurements)
- kneading & shaping dough
- snipping herbs with dull scissors
- cutting soft foods with a blunt knife (such as pears, bananas, etc.)
- helping to set and clear the table
- learning to handwash unbreakable items
- sweeping up crumbs on the floor

Teenagers

At this age, it's important to foster your teen's growing independence, so rather than having them help you at every meal, turn the tables and have them take more initiative, with you offering to help them. Here are some tasks that help teenagers continue to grow in their confidence and independence in the kitchen:

- planning and preparing an entire meal for their family, or a family in need
- making shopping lists and shopping for ingredients
- helping younger children learn about real food and how to prepare it
- experimenting with tweaking and developing new recipes

----- Ideas for Making Mealtimes More Fun -----

- **Use butcher paper as a tablecloth** and provide a few crayons at each place setting so family members can draw funny pictures (*or play Pictionary*) while eating.
- **Create or use conversation cards** with topics of interest to the majority of family members. These can help to spark both interesting and funny conversations at the dinner table.
- **Move meals to other locations**, instead of always eating at the dining room table. For example: Host a family picnic in the living room, backyard, park or beach.
- **Plan a Theme Night!** This can be anything from something as simple as a cultural-themed dinner such as Italian night, to a favorite story-themed meal such as making Stone Soup together, or Green Eggs Ham. Another fun theme is Fancy Restaurant Night. Set the mood with a tablecloth and candle, and have each family member volunteer to play a role, such as chef, hostess and waiter.

Remember ... time in the kitchen with your precious little ones is so much more than just teaching them valuable cooking and healthy eating skills, it's about sharing and enjoying time together as a family – building strong bonds and happy memories to the glory of God! (*Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31*)

For more helpful tips and strategies for cooking with your kids, as well as lots of healthy, family-friendly recipes, please visit TheNourishingHome.com. With love and blessings, Kelly

Ages 6–8

Youngsters in this age group are perfectly capable of handling all of the former tasks, plus are ready to take on even bigger assignments such as:

- learning to read and follow a recipe
- gathering utensils and ingredients
- learning more advanced skills such as whisking, grating, peeling, breaking eggs, etc.
- learning to cut semi-soft fruits & veggies using a kid-safe knife
- advanced measuring of dry and liquid ingredients
- washing dishes and putting away ingredients

Ages 9–12

They'll still need adult supervision, but can easily manage to tackle more advanced jobs such as:

- completing a simple recipe from start to finish
- operating small appliances like blenders, mini-choppers, electric mixers, juicers, etc.
- learning safe knife skills for chopping, dicing, mincing and cutting
- learning to use the stovetop and oven safely (under careful supervision)
- learning safe food handling (especially with regard to meats/poultry)
- learning to load/unload dishwasher