



Getting Kids in the Kitchen

Article written by Tara Dunker (tara.dunker@unl.edu), MS, RD, Extension Educator

The goal is learning, not perfection. Once you get into this headspace, it becomes easier—and more fun—to involve children in the food preparation process. The best time to do this would be when an imperfect final product, extra time and extra mess will not undo your day. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, here are five ways to enjoy cooking with your children



Engage All the Senses: As adults, we sometimes forget how intimidating tasting a new food can be. Help your child explore new foods using the other four senses first. Kneading dough, rinsing produce, popping popcorn, and tearing lettuce help build positive, fun associations without having to dive headfirst into tasting an unfamiliar food.

Teach STEM Through Cooking: The subjects of science, technology, engineering, and math are all the rage right now, and what better way to incorporate them into your home than cooking. Lean into these subjects by encouraging your child to read recipes. They are full of math concepts like counting, proportions, and fractions. Your child can practice these skills by doing the measuring themselves.

Discuss the ‘whys’ behind recipe steps to bring out the science of food preparation. Why do we add eggs to baked goods, and what happens to the final product when we substitute applesauce instead? Helpful hint: Eggs give structure to baked goods. And while applesauce can be used to substitute small amounts of egg, the texture and density of your final product may change slightly.

Make It a Family Affair: Family meal preparation is an opportunity to connect your child to their roots by passing down recipes. Bring out this sense of belonging even further by having them help you find new, seasonal recipes to add to your family

traditions. Prioritizing health and togetherness, over convenience, is a wonderful way to lead by example in forming lifelong healthy habits.

Keep It Safe: Teach your child the importance of staying safe while cooking by demonstrating the proper way to wash hands, hold a knife, how to use oven mitts, and how to operate appliances safely. Set both yourself and your child up for success by only delegating age-appropriate tasks. By doing this, even toddlers can get involved—think tearing those lettuce leaves like mentioned earlier.

Ask for Input: Just like adults, children want to feel their voices are heard and valued. Involve your child when making your weekly shopping and meal list. When cooking together, allow your child to offer opinions about the food and ideas for where recipe adjustments can be made. Even something as simple as putting your child in charge of setting the table will help them feel invested in mealtimes.

This newsletter was peer-reviewed and updated in 2025. Check out more Family Fun on the Run articles: <http://go.unl.edu/familyrun>

Source: Nimali, F. (2024). 5 Great Reasons to Cook with Your Kids, American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx>