

Little Chefs, Big Benefits: Cooking with Young Children



Getting children into the kitchen is a great way to have fun and try new recipes. Cooking with children is also a chance to share traditions, learn about different cultures and spend time together.

Contributing in the kitchen has many benefits for children’s skill development:

- ✓ Encourages positive food attitudes
- ✓ Improves food choices
- ✓ Nurtures a sense of well-being
- ✓ Teaches food preparation skills
- ✓ Develops a lifelong enjoyment of cooking
- ✓ Introduces, and improves acceptance of, new foods
- ✓ Develops creativity
- ✓ Teaches problem-solving
- ✓ Improves literacy (vocabulary, basic reading)
- ✓ Reinforces math skills (measuring)
- ✓ Teaches science (solids, liquids, mixed foods)
- ✓ Improves self-reliance

There are lots of ways to make sure that young children are comfortable, safe and engaged in the kitchen – and to guarantee they have fun!



*“...no one is born a great cook, one learns by doing.”
– Julia Child, My Life in France*

Create an Inviting Cooking Space

Create a positive learning environment

- **Start with observation.** Allow children to start off by keeping you company or just watching in the kitchen. Confidence takes time but they will dive in when they're ready.
- **Keep it simple.** Choose easy to make meals or snacks that children can actually help with. Remember that children are learning and recipes will take longer than usual. Be patient and offer encouragement.

Let the children decide whether to try the foods you prepare. Children may get more pleasure from cooking if they feel no pressure to try the foods they make.

- **Use all five senses.** Touch, taste, smell, hear and see all the wonders of ingredients coming together. It's a great way to build children's appreciation of food.

Make the kitchen welcoming

- **Choose the time of day.** Plan your food activities for times when the children are fresh and alert. They will have more difficulty paying attention if they are hungry, tired or restless.
- **Cook like a chef.** Use *mise en place* – “to set in place.” Before bringing your chefs into the kitchen, gather and
- **Use kid-size tools.** Short mixing spoons, small bowls and knives and kid-size oven mitts are more easily manageable for small hands.
- **Use non-breakable cooking equipment.** Plastic liquid measuring cups, stainless-steel bowls and metal bakeware are all kid-friendly.



prepare all the ingredients (except those that the children will help with). Place prepared ingredients in bowls, lined up in the order they will be used. Lay out all the cooking equipment too – make it feel like a cooking show!

- **Bring it down to their level.** Set up the cooking space at the children's physical level, using a child-size table and chairs. Working at the right level makes it comfortable and easier for them to perform cooking tasks safely.

- **Pre-assign tasks.** Let helpers know beforehand what they will be doing (and the utensils they'll use) to avoid tussles over tools and jobs. For example, Peter will whisk, Anton will stir and Fatima will pour. Next time we'll switch, and everyone takes turns.

Build an appreciation for food and the world around us

- **Grow your own.** Grow vegetables or herbs in small containers that can be placed on a sunny windowsill. It's fun, educational and even tasty! Let the children take turns watering the plants.
- **Avoid food waste.** When possible, use all parts of the food. Leave the skins on cucumbers, apples and potatoes. This reduces food waste, and fruit and vegetable skin delivers important nutrients, including fibre.
- **Re-use food scraps.** Encourage children to collect trimmings while preparing food. Clean fruit rinds add to presentation and flavour. Vegetable scraps, such as celery and carrot tops, can be made into a soup broth.
- **Compost and recycle.** Provide the necessary bins to get the kids involved in composting food waste and recycling appropriate food packaging.



Get the kids involved in composting food waste.

“Cooking is at once child's play and adult joy. And cooking done with care is an act of love.”

– Craig Claiborne
Restaurant critic, cookbook author

Tips for Cooking with Young Children

Prepare the cooking space

Be safe around appliances

- **Set the ground rules.** Explain the adults-only rule and give reminders often. Only adults can put things into or remove things from a hot oven or microwave, use electrical appliances and pour hot liquids. Some knives are for adults only.
- **Keep appliances unplugged.** When you're ready to use them, only adults can plug them in. Never leave appliances unattended when they are in use.
- **Take your timer.** Use a clip-on timer or portable oven timer, rather than the oven's own timer, and carry it with you. It is easy to forget that something is in the oven until it's too late.
- **Restrict the oven area.** Put masking tape on the floor to section off an area around the oven. Instruct children to stay behind the line whenever the oven door is open.
- **Avoid burns.** Create placards that say "HOT" in red paired with an image of a flame. Place near anything hot.
- **Use wooden or silicone spoons to stir the contents of hot pots.** An all-metal spoon can get too hot. Protect hands and arms with kid-size oven mitts (preferably silicone-coated).
- **Mind the handles.** Point pot handles toward the side or back of the stove to avoid accidentally brushing against them or having children grab them and spill the hot contents. Metal pot handles can be covered with silicone grips to prevent burns.



Be safe when cutting food

- **Use cutting boards.** Chop, slice and assemble recipes on a clean cutting board. To prevent the board from slipping, place a damp cloth underneath it.
- **Use a crinkle cutter.** A crinkle cutter is a great tool for cutting cheese, fruits and vegetables. Remember to treat it as a knife and remind children to use two hands when cutting, one on the food and one on the cutter.
- **Try scissors.** As an alternative to knives when children are first starting out in the kitchen, scissors can be used to cut fresh herbs or to chop peppers.



A crinkle cutter is a great tool for kids to use.

- **Use the right knives.** Use knives with different coloured handles, or wrap coloured tape around the handles, so kids can identify which end to grab and which knives are for adults only. Start with a plastic knife or serrated dinner knife (with a round tip). Progress to a small paring knife (with supervision) – they are the perfect size for little hands.

Be food safe

- **Be a safe cook.** Follow the four important food safety steps to eliminate harmful bacteria and reduce the risk of foodborne illness.
 - ✓ **Clean** – Wash hands and surfaces often
 - ✓ **Separate** – Don't cross-contaminate
 - ✓ **Cook** – To a safe internal temperature
 - ✓ **Chill** – To 4°C (40°F) or lower
- Get detailed food safety information, handouts and posters at befoodsafe.ca.
- **Sanitize with a mild bleach solution.** Remember to follow your facility or local health unit recommendations for bleach solutions. An example of a safe solution is 1 tsp (5 mL) of bleach to 4 cups (1 L) of water.

