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Kids in the kitchen: an age-by-age guide

By Stacey Stein

If you're thinking which life skills to impart upon your kids, cooking should rank at the top of the list. After all, once kids leave the nest, they'll need to figure out how to feed themselves several times a day, every single day of their lives. But the ability to nourish oneself isn't the only reason to teach children the difference between a pot roast and a stew, or how to safely use a butcher's knife.

"Cooking together helps kids develop healthier eating habits," says registered dietitian Shannon Crocker. This is a bonus with kids who are selective eaters, she adds. There are other benefits, too. Crocker, a mom of two teens, notes that shared time in the kitchen is a good way to connect as a family. "I find we have great conversations that come up naturally as we're cooking together," she says.

With March Break coming up, you'll have the perfect opportunity to bond with your kids while teaching them how to flip a pancake or chop an onion. With that in mind, here's an age-by-age guide on how to introduce your kids to the joys of cooking.

Ages two to five

Kitchen skills

At this age, kids' fine motor skills are developed enough that their little hands can handle tasks like kneading, stirring, spreading, placing toppings, mixing ingredients, greasing pans, whisking, scooping, and pouring dry ingredients. You can even introduce cutting and chopping skills – use a wave slicer to chop soft foods and a cookie cutter to cut up dough, soft fruit and cheese.

Preschooler-friendly recipes

Try making this [baked banana chip oatmeal to go](#) and let your preschooler take on pouring and stirring the dry ingredients. Tiny tots will also have a blast mashing up the bananas and can help line the muffin tins and sprinkle chocolate chips. Tip: Keep hot muffin tins out of reach while they're cooling.

Most kids love yogurt drinks, which are often high in sugar. These [strawberry coconut overnight chia oats](#) are not only a great low sugar alternative, they're also versatile – eat them for breakfast or as a healthy snack.

General safety tips

- Find a safe way to get your little ones to table height (like a learning tower or booster seat)
- Teach your kids to ask an adult if it's okay before eating any ingredients
- Start teaching your little ones hygiene habits like hand washing, not touching their face, and pre-washing work surfaces

Ages six to eight

Kitchen skills

Young grade school kids can start taking their kitchen skills to the next level. At this age, kids can learn how to crack eggs, pour batter into a pan (or in muffin tins), and can peel and grate some ingredients. When it comes to chopping skills, kids this age can start cutting apples with a slicer and chop harder foods with a wave slicer (be sure to supervise.) You can also teach young school-aged kids how to measure ingredients.

Little kid-friendly recipes

Put your little ones' cutting skills to the test with this [caramel apple dip with spice tortilla chips](#). Using clean kitchen scissors, children can cut the tortillas into a wedge shape. They can also safely slice the apples using an apple slicer instead of a knife.

Universally loved by the school-aged set, spaghetti and meatballs get a fun twist in [this recipe](#). Made in muffin tins, these spaghetti and meatball bites are easy for little hands to prepare. Kids can take on cracking the egg, filling the muffin tins with pasta, adding the meatball, and topping it off with cheese. Basically, making the entire bite!

General safety tips

- Have a low stool easily accessible for your mini chef to reach the counter (keep a collapsible stool nearby)
- Teach about checking if food has cooled down before doing a taste test
- It may be tempting, but no one likes a tummy ache: no eating raw batter!
- Teach how to safely stir food while it's cooking on the stovetop

Ages nine to 12

Kitchen skills

Older school-aged kids are ready to master more complex skills, laying the groundwork for them to make a wider range of recipes. At this age, kids can mix thicker recipes (like cookie dough), peel, chop, grate and slice, and learn how to use appliances like an electric juicer or a hand mixer. Older kids can also learn cooking basics like how to fry eggs, flip pancakes, and separate egg whites. You can also teach other skills like how to halve or double a recipe, and an important one – how to clean up!

Big kid-friendly recipes

These [apple pie cottage cheese pancakes](#) incorporate all kinds of advanced kitchen skills. To teach kids how to safely use heat, let them first practice flipping with a cool pan.

[Apple cheddar quesadillas](#) incorporate the same advanced kitchen skills. This recipe will help big kids master important skills like testing for heat using water droplets and removing the pan from the heat if it gets too hot.

General safety tips

- Teach kids about using a stool to retrieve ingredients stored out of reach before getting started (to prevent reaching over a hot stove)
- Make sure long hair is tied back
- Avoid long, loose sleeves if using the stovetop
- Keep pot handles turned towards the back of the stove

Teens

Kitchen skills

You can groom your teens to become full-fledged cooks. At this age, kids can master most advanced kitchen skills with detailed instructions and supervision, before working in the kitchen independently. Teach your teen how to choose the right knife for different tasks, how to safely slice, dice, and chop, and how to use handy appliances like a slow cooker.

Teen-friendly recipes

Coffee-loving teens will enjoy this protein- and calcium-rich [mocha smoothie](#). It only takes a few minutes to whip up, making this a perfect go-to drink for time-crunched teens prone to skipping breakfast. Tip: mixing in a banana will give the smoothie a thicker consistency, along with a fibre boost.

This hearty [pasta supreme](#) is easy for teens to make and will feed the entire family. Be sure to first teach your teenager how to drain an entire pot of cold water into a colander so they are comfortable when it comes to draining boiling water.

General safety tips

Teach teens how to:

- Clean up spills on the floor right away to avoid slipping hazards
- Bring out hot trays for flipping, testing, etc. (never reach into a hot oven)
- Put a lid on a pot if there is a flame (instead of pouring water on a greasy fire)
- Use a fire extinguisher

Final thoughts

Crocker recommends cooking with kids when you aren't rushed and have some time, so avoid a weeknight when you're scrambling to get to an activity. Another tip is to start off small. "It doesn't have to be a meal – it can be a baked good, a smoothie or a simple snack," she says.

And no matter what age your kids are, patience is key to enjoying your time together in the kitchen. "Try not to get frustrated," Crocker advises. "Expect that it's going to be messy and it's going to take more time."