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Teaching Kids to Cook

When it comes to teaching kids to cook, the primary thing to consider is safety. I'm not giving a three-year-old sharp knives nor letting a five-year-old operate a stove. Common sense has to reign supreme. The best approach is to start with basics.

Before we get to that, you have to understand that it's going to be messy and it's going to take a lot longer. Those are givens. It may be better to pick one afternoon or evening to dedicate to cooking with your kids, creating soups, casseroles, and crockpot meals for the coming week. You can begin by taking them grocery shopping with just a list of ingredients for the recipes you're going to prepare. They can help find the food (with some direction) and select the proper amounts needed for the recipe. Farmers markets are great because they demonstrate that there are people raising food for your table, and that starts building respect for the whole farm-to-table cycle.

Then it's time to begin the cooking process. Cooking involves nutrition, science, and math, if not more; I know some readers homeschool their children, and one option is to make it part of the day's lessons. If your kids aren't homeschooled, cooking at home is a good way to connect what they learn at school with real life.

Children can start by handing you tools as soon as they can learn the difference between a spatula and a whisk and a mixing spoon. Amazon sells measuring spoons and cups that are color coordinated with children in mind, including this stackable set by Vitabliss. They might not be able to pick out the quarter cup if they're very young, but I'll bet they could pick out the red one. They could then move up to measuring ingredients. Depending on where kids are on their math lessons, it would be a great time to teach addition and fractions. Dividing a recipe in half is a real-life challenge to math skills.



Here's one idea. Let them measure out one cup of flour. Then using a counter scraper or bread dough cutter, have them make two equal piles. Have them put one of the piles in the half-cup. Take the other pile and divide that into two equal piles. I think you can see where this is going. You can go all the way down to your smallest measuring spoon, if you want.

When they're stronger and more coordinated, they can pour ingredients into a bowl and stir things. One of the comments from a chef on *The Kitchen* was to make the bowl twice as big as it needs to be to limit spilling, especially wet ingredients. And though I've never cooked with a kid, I bet they'd love cracking eggs (maybe start with hard boiled) and mashing avocados or potatoes; breaking and smashing things is always a hit with kids. Maybe they'd be happy to know the position has a title: sous chef.

Kids can wash vegetables and learn to arrange ingredients on a plate such as salad ingredients. You can start them out with a butter knife to cut avocado halves or cheese slices, then graduate to sharper knives and harder foods as they get older. Another tip was that when they can hold a pencil well enough to write their name, they have enough coordination to use a knife. Another comment from a chef suggested that the sharp knives be kept out of sight and reach behind the chopping block when young children are around.

One more important tip: when you're cooking on the stove, make sure all the handles are facing away. Kids may see the handles and naturally want to reach up and grab or just bump the handle and cause a spill. That could be a disaster and cause severe burns. Take that temptation away!

Eventually they get old enough and they can turn the mixer on and off, open and close the oven door, and eventually, fry things in a pan. In reality, it will take years to get there. It's just that the sooner you begin, the better off they will be, the more interested they'll be in food, and the more likely they'll be to eat vegetables.

Another option is to take a cooking class with your kids designed for kids. They offer courses all year round at the Downtown Market Grand Rapids. Summer has been the busiest time because kids are out of school and have time to go to Simmer Camp—yes, that's what it's called. I'm sure there's an organization in your area that provides some type of cooking classes for kids. Maybe cooking's not as glamorous as soccer, martial arts, or ballet, but to me life skills are just as important. Few schools teach kids the skills they need to be independent. It's up to you to find a way.

I think teaching children to prepare food gives them an appreciation of a wider variety of foods. Not only that, it gives them a sense of pride that they can do something grownup and contribute to the family. It also teaches them that meals don't come in a bag from the side of a building. One more thing: it gives you a chance to spend time with your kids. The fact that you're doing something together is more important to them than just about anything else, so be sure to start young before they get too sophisticated to want your attention.

Now it's your turn. If we're friends on [Facebook](#)—and if we're not, why aren't we?—leave a comment on the post for today's message giving us your best tip for cooking with kids. Everybody wins.

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Dr. Chet

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