

## Cooking With Your Child

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It's dinner time. That chaotic time you may very well dread - if you're a parent, that is. Five o'clock rolls around, and suddenly the house is in turmoil – tearing around like mad, throwing various objects, and screeching ensues. The commotion makes any sane person want to run and hide under the covers with a novel, some sturdy ear plugs, and perhaps a strong cocktail. The good news is you can make most meal times better if you actually include your children in the process.

Easier said than done? Well, maybe not. There are ways you can have your kids help, teach them a thing or two, and get them interested in cooking all at the same time, while your house quiets down to a low simmer.

1. **Plan your meals with your child.** If she's included in the process of deciding what to make, it will help her feel like she is in more control of the situation, and therefore she'll be more interested in cooking with you. Make sure that what you both decide makes sense in the context of the meal. For example, you might not want to have peanut butter with chocolate sauce for dinner. Stick to a plan with which you both agree.
2. **Write down the menu beforehand, and prepare accordingly.** Make sure you have all the ingredients in your kitchen. Look through the refrigerator together if you need ideas of what to make.
3. **Set some ground rules before you begin.** It's always a good idea for a grown-up to take care of certain areas in the kitchen exclusively, so let your child know that certain things are off-limits to him. Have him stand at the counter where he can't reach the knives, and make sure he is situated well away from the stove and the oven. *Note: If your child is older – say, twelve or more - you might want to let him try his hand at chopping, and cooking at the stovetop. Since you are the one who knows your child best, use your own discretion. Just remember to always supervise.*
4. **Go over your recipes.** Run through the recipe for dinner, either on paper or in your head, so that you have an idea of what steps your child can perform and what steps are only for you to do. Cooking procedures such as mixing, stirring,

pouring, measuring, adding sugar and spice, and prep work that don't involve knives are good steps for young children to handle.

5. **Teach your child to follow directions.** Your child should know that the most important thing to remember when learning to cook is to listen. Sometimes a child is so excited she's helping you in the kitchen, she might begin to make a small creation of her own - without your consent. Help her to realize that she needs to be a good listener in order for you both to make a delicious meal, and that it is important for her to follow the directions.
6. **Have fun and be patient.** Young children are notoriously curious, and they will take a lot longer to complete a step than you might like - especially when there are fun accoutrements to play with, such as flour, salt, and perhaps the most delightful of all, water. Go into this process being aware that it will take longer than if you were doing it alone. Try to relax and not get too caught up in the "right" way to do things. Your child will learn to love cooking if you let him explore. Be his guide, teach him your tricks, and he'll come away from the experience feeling empowered, satisfied, and proud that he created a complete meal with you.

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### Some more tips:

- **Make a "menu card"** to put on the table, for when the family sits down to eat. You can pretend you're a restaurant, with a list of what is being offered for each course. Naturally, you won't list entrees to choose from, but you can write a description for each course, with the ingredients listed. Have your child help you make up the description, and have her design the card with her own artwork. It will make her feel special and important.
- **Tell your family** what your child did for the meal. For example, you could say that Joe made the sauce and mixed together the stuffing. He'll love that you remembered the specific things he did, and it will give your family a chance to exclaim over his culinary talents.
- **Try as hard as you can** not to scold, criticize, or take over. It might be tempting to step in if things are going too slowly, with a "Let me do it." If your child needs help in a certain area, you can show her how it's done - but then let her have the control back again. If you try to take control over what she's doing too many times, she'll lose interest, naturally coming to the conclusion that she can't do it herself. It might be frustrating to you at first, but like anything, the more she practices, the more she'll get the hang of it. And soon, she'll be the one cooking *you* dinner.