



Health and Nutrition



How Cooking Can Help Preschoolers

Bringing kids into the kitchen can benefit them in a number of ways. Cooking can help:

Build basic skills. You can help your child practice basic math skills by doing something as simple as counting eggs or pouring water into a measuring cup. You can ask what comes first, second, and third or count together as you spoon dough onto a cookie sheet. When you read a recipe together, you're introducing new words to your child's vocabulary and promoting literacy. Following steps in the recipe can work on listening skills.

Encourage an adventurous palate. Preschoolers are notoriously picky eaters, and bringing them into the kitchen to cook can help get them to open up to new tastes. When your 3-year-old daughter plays chef she might sample dishes she wouldn't try if you just served them to her. So encourage kids to taste new ingredients you're working with and talk about what they like and how healthy foods make a body grow.

Help young kids explore with their senses. Kids learn by exploring with their senses and the kitchen is an ideal place to do that. Invite them to listen to the whirl of the mixer, pound dough and watch it rise, smell it baking in the oven, and finally taste the warm bread fresh from the oven. If it smells good, looks appealing, and is easy to eat they may just be willing to try it!

Boost confidence. Preschoolers love to show what they can do and working in the kitchen provides opportunities to gain a sense of accomplishment. If they helped assemble the pizza, let them know that their help was important. You could name the pizza or another dish after your child. Serve "Will's Pizza" or "Ella's Salad" for dinner tonight. Even if the end results are not exactly what you expected, praise their efforts.



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Ideal Jobs for Preschoolers in the Kitchen

A few tasks in the kitchen are particularly well-suited to kids ages 3 to 5. The key is to give them "jobs" that meet their skill level and are something they enjoy. So if your child loves to pound, bring out the bread dough and let your preschooler pound away.

Here are some other ways kids can help:

- stirring pancake batter
- tearing lettuce for salad
- adding ingredients
- assembling a pizza
- helping you "read" a cookbook by turning the pages

Getting Started

From riding a tricycle to getting dressed, preschoolers are learning how much they can do all by themselves. So look for a few cooking-related activities that your child can successfully complete independently or with a minimum of involvement from you. Simple tasks like pouring liquid into the bowl, sprinkling cheese on top of the casserole, or using cookie cutters are a good fit for most preschoolers.

Don't plan an elaborate project — 5 to 10 minutes might be all your child wants to spend on an activity. Start small and keep it fun. As kids grow, they will develop the skills, attention span, and interest to do bigger cooking jobs, like squeezing the juice out of a lemon, measuring ingredients into cups and spoons, and beating eggs or mashing potatoes.

Preschoolers will also enjoy learning with you. For safety reasons, you should be in the kitchen with them at all times, supervising and monitoring progress.

Spending time in the kitchen with your kids can foster an interest in food and cooking that will last for life!