

Kids in the Kitchen

Teach your kids to learn to cook healthy, nutritious meals and give them one of the most invaluable lessons they will ever learn.

Spending time in the kitchen with your kids is the purest forms of quality time. Despite our constant on the go lives, the kitchen remains the heart of the home. This uninterrupted family time creates lasting memories that your kids will pass down to their kids. The rhythmic routine of meal preparation may help them move through life at a more mindful, less frantic pace.

Let your kitchen serve as an informal laboratory where kids learn about the benefits of healthy cooking and eating as they experiment with foods of different tastes and textures. Their experiments may lead them to taste unfamiliar foods, or try foods they refused to eat, but find more palatable when prepared differently.

Rather than lecturing about good nutrition, give your kids hands on experience creating delicious, healthy meals and snacks. The valuable life skills they learn are an added benefit. They will better understand math and science principles, learn the value and necessity of teamwork, planning and making wise choices.

Making the first meal creative, fun and easy sparks their curiosity and interest. Learning to cook encourages your child's creativity. Other than crayons, where else can they find so many bright colors to play with?

Most important, they learn the benefits of healthy cooking and eating. This helps them avoid childhood obesity now, and the diet treadmill later. Self-esteem soars as they see their creations come to life, making them feel part of the team that helps sustain the family in a most basic way.

Plan a specific night each week to cook with your kids, and make this time inviolable. Choose a night when homework and outside activities are not an issue.

Add some fun by buying a chef's hat for each child. Printing each name on the headband with a permanent marker makes it more personal.

Start with a simple chicken vegetable salad. Make a list of ingredients not on hand, and go shopping together. Teach your kids to choose healthy ingredients, read labels and purchase wisely at the supermarket.

First, teach your kids basic sanitation by requiring everyone's hands be clean before, during and after handling food.

As you work together, give each child a task according to each one's abilities. This is a great time to connect and learn what is going on in their lives. As each person performs his or her task, conversations take place that you might not otherwise hear.

Set a small table for young children with wooden and plastic utensils within easy reach, and make sure sharp objects are safely beyond little hands.

Have older children cut broccoli, carrots, summer squash, red pepper strips, cauliflower, tomato, cucumber, onion and purple cabbage into bite size pieces.

Help older children cut a boneless chicken breast into thin strips or bite size pieces. Sauté chicken in one-tablespoon olive oil, one teaspoon granulated garlic, and one half teaspoon Worcestershire sauce. Grill chicken in warmer weather by brushing with olive oil, garlic and Worcestershire sauce before placing on the grill.

When all preparation is completed, instruct your kids on how to properly cook the meal, and let them go for it!

While the chicken is cooking, ask kids to place a small bed of mixed greens on each plate, and arrange the cut vegetables in an attractive display over the greens. Let their creativity run free! Top with chicken pieces and sliced almonds.

Your kids, under your close supervision, created an attractive, healthy meal. Add your favorite low fat salad dressing, garlic flavored bread sticks, beverage, and enjoy! Cook together at least once a week, and see their skills and confidence increase as your family becomes closer.

Giving your kids a love of healthy cooking and eating will stand them in good stead throughout their lives. The lessons learned in “cooking lab,” will help avoid the pitfalls of unhealthy eating that they will pass to future generations.