

Cooking Matters... Developing Food Skills

Developing food skills can be both educational and fun. The little effort it takes to involve children and youth in cooking helps to build healthy eating habits and pays off in many other ways too.

What are food skills?

Food skills are all of the cooking and food preparation knowledge and skills needed to prepare and provide regular, nutritious meals and snacks for an individual or family. When children learn these skills, they can begin to help out in the kitchen and learn the skills they need to prepare and eat regular, nutritious meals and snacks when they leave home.

What are the benefits of food skills?

1. *Pass on family traditions* – Keep cultural roots alive by teaching young people about family favourites. Children can learn about different cultures through food and cooking.
2. *Provide learning that sticks* – Hands-on learning is one of the best ways to get information and skills to really sink in. Math and science concepts start making real world sense to kids as they apply and experience them through cooking.
3. *Help with picky eaters* – The sense of pride that comes with making a recipe or meal might just entice children to try something new.
4. *Bring the classroom into the kitchen* – Students can learn about:
 - *Health:* Make a healthy meal or snack
 - *Language:* Read a recipe, write a grocery list, learn new vocabulary, and follow instructions
 - *Math:* Count, sort, measure and work with fractions
 - *Science:* Make and test predictions. What will happen when we put this in the oven?
 - *Social Studies:* Discover where certain food is grown. Find out more about ethnic cuisines from around the world
 - *Small and large muscle control:* Stir, chop, knead, and pour
 - *Social skills:* Work together, take turns, and share utensils

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Children of all ages can help out in the kitchen

Children develop cooking skills at different rates. Introduce children to skills that match their ability level. Remember, wash all hands with warm soap and water before starting!

Age	Examples of age-appropriate food skills tasks
2 – 3 year olds	<p>Young children learn through their senses – sight, touch, smell, hearing, and tasting. Often kids will insist on doing a task themselves, but their attention spans are short. Let them try small, simple tasks and keep things safe by supervising closely. Try letting your kids:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice handwashing before working with food • Dry produce in a salad spinner • Break bread into pieces • Dip foods (eg, dip bread into egg batter) • Pick fresh herb leaves off the stem • Add ingredients to a bowl • Help find ingredients in the cupboards and fridge • Carry unbreakable items to the table • Put things in the garbage after cooking • Shake a drink in a closed container • Put paper muffin cups in the muffin tin  <p>Some kids will be content with an empty bowl and spoon while you cook. Chat with them about the tasty food they are making that smells so good.</p>
4 – 6 year olds	<p>This is an age where kids vary in their motor skills, independence and ability to focus. Cooking can help to develop these skills. Try letting your kids do the above tasks, and if they are ready, try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the tools and equipment needed for the recipe • Assemble foods: make trail mix or their own yogurt sundae with toppings you have prepared • Help measure, add and stir ingredients together • Help pour batter into a baking dish • Slice soft cooked vegetables, soft fruit, cheese or tofu with a plastic dull knife • Crack and beat an egg • Spread butter and/or spreads • Wash and scrub vegetables and fruit • Tear lettuce to make salad • Peel some fruits (eg, bananas) • Mash soft fruits and vegetables • Juice oranges, lemons and limes • Press cookie cutters • Arrange food on a serving plate • Set and clear the table • Cook with a friend for a fun play date • Tell you what they know about where food comes from 

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6 – 8 year olds	<p>By this age, kids can take on more detailed work like using measuring spoons and cups. As they learn to read, an especially rewarding activity is to read cookbooks and follow recipes with your child. Kids this age can follow simple steps for recipes and are able to share and take turns. Start to teach the cooking vocabulary (eg, mince, dice, chop, sift, beat, grill, broil, etc). Let your kids do the above tasks, and if they are ready, try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use simple kitchen equipment such as a grater, toaster, blender, can opener or garlic press after you show them how to do so safely • Fill and level measuring spoons and cups • Read an easy recipe aloud (some may not have reading skills yet) • Do most tasks in recipe with adult help, except placing items and taking them out of a hot oven • Use the microwave with your help • Rinse grains and canned beans • Scoop out baked potatoes or avocados • Scoop batter into muffin cups • Form cookies and patties • Shred cheese (may need your help) • Use a pizza cutter • Make a simple breakfast: whole grain cereal with canned fruit over yogurt • Make simple cold spring rolls or tortilla wraps • Toss salad ingredients with salad dressing • Invent a fruit salad or smoothie recipe • Tell you what food belongs to what food group • Borrow kid-friendly cookbooks from the library • Write a list of healthy snacks they like to eat and post on the fridge • Write out the grocery list 
9 – 11 year olds	<p>Skills vary widely in this age group. Some nine year olds are not mature enough to work at the stove, while others can be quite competent. Generally kids at this age are more coordinated and able to understand how to use appliances safely.</p> <p>Try letting your kids do the above tasks, and if they are ready, try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare simple recipes • Use a sharp knife with easy to cut foods (cooked meats, vegetables and fruits that are easier to grip, cheese, tofu) • Use a timer and thermometer • Pound chicken or meat • Slice bread • Put away leftovers • Make their own school lunch • Trim and slice vegetables • Make a fresh vegetable or fruit platter to go with dinner 

Age	Examples of age-appropriate food skills tasks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knead dough and let it rise • Use the stove, with supervision, to make basic recipes: boiled eggs, pasta, omelets, pancakes, quesadillas, soups or grilled cheese • Use a food processor, blender and stand mixer • Use specialty appliances such as a panini press and waffle maker. If able buy, your budding chef their own waffle maker, sandwich grill or cookbook to keep them inspired • Decide what is needed to balance out a meal so it has food from each food group • Store food safely, after grocery shopping or meal preparation
12+ year olds	<p>Kids who have learned the skills above can be more independent in the kitchen—with coaching from parents/caregivers. Think about safety first at all times. It remains important that parents/caregivers are home and supervise some activities. Tasks kids can try include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow a recipe without help • Use an oven or stove • Use a chef’s knife or other larger knives with supervision • Use a grater to shred cheese or carrots independently • Plan a dinner menu • Develop grocery shopping skills (selection, cost, label reading, essential ingredients) • Suggest options for using meal leftovers

Together we can make the healthy choice the easy choice!

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For information on healthy schools go to the Ministry of Education Healthy Schools website
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/healthyschools.html>