How to Get your Kids to Help in the Kitchen

Kids who are given the opportunity to be involved in meal preparation are more likely to understand basic nutritional concepts that will form a foundation for the rest of their lives. Parents can be skeptical that their young kids can learn to cook but exposure to “scratch cooking” helps to develop a taste for fresh wholesome ingredients. Kids are also much more likely to eat what they make because cooking creates a sense of ownership. And meals prepared from scratch are usually much healthier than pre-packaged foods and restaurant meals.

Here are some ideas on how to start cooking with your kids:
Pick a good time. It’s important that your first cooking experience with children is a positive one, so pick a time when everyone is well-rested and not starving.
Start with something familiar. When introducing the concept of cooking to kids, it’s important to start with one of their favorite dishes so that they equate cooking with something they already enjoy.

Find assistants. Invite Grandma over or keep your sitter for an extra hour. It will be more fun for everyone if there is someone else to help oversee the project and clean up.
Accept that it will get messy. Plan on some mess and you’ll feel less stressed. Kids are great cleaner-uppers so ask them to pitch in. Many kids, as young as 2 years old, love using a sponge and do a surprisingly good job of wiping up.
Roll with the punches. If something goes wrong, just laugh. It’s a good opportunity to teach children how to shrug off mistakes and learn from their blunders.
Praise their efforts. They adore making food for family members so give them lots of compliments when they complete a task well – genuine, well-deserved praise builds self-worth and confidence.

Choose the right tasks. Plan ahead when deciding what to prepare. For younger kids, consider starting with a simple dish with few ingredients.
These are additional suggestions for age appropriate activities.

Measure and Pour:
• Very young children can watch as you measure wet and dry ingredients, explaining the terms “cup,” “teaspoon,” and “tablespoon.” Once you level the dry ingredients, your child can pour them into a bowl. This is a great time to practice counting (to keep track of how many cups or teaspoons are already in the bowl).
• As children get a little older, around 4 or 5 years old, you can start letting them pour or scoop ingredients into measuring tools. Teach them how to level dry ingredients by using the straight edge of a knife or metal spatula, and how to check liquid measurements at eye-level.
• School-age children can continue to measure and count on their own, but this is also a good time to introduce conversions (i.e., 1 tablespoon = 3 teaspoons or 1½ cups = 3 half-cups) and measuring by weight.

Stirring and Combining
• Very young children can practice stirring batters and combining dry ingredients using a wooden spoon, a fork, or a spatula.
• Preschoolers can start learning to use different techniques, including beating or whipping ingredients using a whisk or egg beater. When they stir ingredients together, teach them to scrape the sides to incorporate everything.
• School-age children can begin using hand-held electric beaters and learning new techniques like folding when using airy ingredients.

Preparing Ingredients
• Even the youngest children can help with preparing ingredients by fetching things from the refrigerator, assisting with the salad spinner when you clean greens, and rinsing fruits and vegetables.
• Preschool kids can start tearing lettuce for the salad, scrubbing potatoes to clean them, and cutting soft foods (like olives and strawberries) with a butter knife or dull plastic knife. They can also begin learning how to crack an egg.
• Make sure school-age children are aware of knife safety before letting them use the “grown-up” knives. It’s up to you to determine when your child is ready for these serious tools, but peeling vegetables and cutting ingredients are great jobs for older kids. You can also start teaching culinary skills like mincing, chopping, dicing, and julienning. Another great skill to teach at this time is how to separate an egg. Just make sure you have extras!

Cleaning up
• Small children can help with clean up tasks by using a small brush or broom and handheld dustpan on the floor. They can wipe up spills on the counter, and put away clean flatware (great for practice in sorting!).
• 4- to 5-year-olds can add to these cleaning skills by using spray bottles of nontoxic cleanser to spray the counter before wiping it clean. They can use brooms or Swiffers on the floor, and help with the dishwasher by filling the soap compartments and pushing the “start” button.
• School-age children can begin washing dishes and loading the dishwasher. When the dishwasher is finished, they can put away things in the cabinets and drawers that they can reach.
• For all ages, make sure to reinforce these skills and habits by making cleaning fun, praising kids for independence in the kitchen (even when they make a mess), and holding kids accountable.

Setting and Serving
• Young children can set out the silverware, put napkins in napkin rings, and carry their own bowls and cups to the table.
• Preschoolers can set the table and pour drinks for the family and make place cards for holiday or event seating.
• School-age children can help serve entrees and side items in addition to setting the table. Teach them which serving utensils are appropriate for different kinds of foods, and then begin letting them choose which one to use for each dish.
Kids who help out in the kitchen and share family meals are creating lifelong memories that will influence the way they eat for the rest of their lives. What better incentive to make this a priority. Enjoy the time you have with your children, we all know that they grow up too fast.