



# Teacher Tip

## Cooking With Kids

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When it comes to teaching children about nutrition, the most direct route may be through the stomach! Nutrition education takes on a whole new life when combined with cooking projects. Children are more willing to try new healthful foods while nutrition principles taught in the classroom become more relevant (and tasty too). Best of all, cooking in school can be a whole lot of fun!

### WHY COOK WITH KIDS?

As children become more self-reliant at an earlier age, a "teachable moment" exists for strengthening food-related life skills. Children are increasingly the caretakers of their own nutrition. In one survey, 87 percent of the fourth through eighth graders sampled said that they cook or make some of their own meals. Eighty-three percent said they sometimes prepare their own snacks and eight out of ten sometimes cook or make their own breakfast. Children who don't know how to cook often rely on packaged foods of questionable nutritional quality. With the advent of ultra-convenience foods, some food experts worry that we are raising a generation of non-cooks, skilled only in using the microwave to heat ready-prepared food.

For this growing number of youngsters, nutrition education can really work when concepts are practical and applied, emphasizing skills like sanitation, safe food handling, and basic food preparation skills. Kids who are on their own for meals can immediately translate their nutrition knowledge into healthful eating behavior. Cooking projects give children a boost in confidence, exposure to new and/or healthful foods, and often provide the curiosity and motivation needed to continue cooking at home.

### ORGANIZING COOKING PROJECTS

One way to efficiently run a classroom-cooking project is to organize an assembly line. Using a long table or salad bar, line up the ingredients for such items as rolled burritos, stuffed pita sandwiches or fresh fruit kebabs (see table below for other ideas). If you utilize this method, make sure there is at least one adult at the beginning and end of the line. Just before

starting through the line, students should put on clean plastic gloves.

For cooking projects that require heating or baking, line large baking trays with parchment paper. Ask students to place finished items on the tray and lightly pencil their initials on the paper below the food. Allow plenty of room between food items.

In situations where students will prepare food at their desk, assign three or four adult volunteers and/or students to hand out food and utensils. Those passing out supplies should practice good hygiene and always wear clean plastic gloves (see sanitation guidelines below).

Regardless of the type of activity or location, managing cooking projects with a classroom of children requires more than one adult. Solicit the assistance of a teacher aide or parent volunteer(s).

### KEEPING IT CLEAN AND SAFE

Cooking lessons offer an opportunity for children to learn the importance of safe food handling. Be sure to reinforce the following points with staff, parent volunteers, and students.

#### Proper Handwashing is Vital!

- Demonstrate to students the techniques for proper handwashing. Thoroughly scrub all surfaces of the hands and nails with soap, rinse with warm water, and dry with clean paper towels.
- The factor most important in producing clean hands is time. Encourage students to scrub hands for the duration of the "A-B-C song" (about 30 seconds).
- If the restroom is used for handwashing prior to handling food, prop the door open. Otherwise, students will touch the bacteria-covered doorknob on their way out.
- Remind students to wash hands after using the restroom, touching their face, hair, or neighbor, blowing their nose or

sneezing, and after handling raw meat, chicken, eggs, or fish.

### **Provide a Sanitary Work Surface for Handling Food**

- Desks or tables should be cleared, cleaned, and covered with clean butcher paper or a vinyl placemat or tablecloth.
- Wash and sanitize all work surfaces, cutting boards, and utensils after they have come into contact with raw meat, fish, poultry, or eggs.

### **Emphasize Safety With Knives and Equipment**

- Before allowing children to begin work on food projects, demonstrate the proper use of knives and equipment. Advise students to always cut towards their table or desk and away from their hands.
- Any equipment, even plastic serrated knives, toothpicks, or wooden skewers, can be dangerous if handled improperly. Promptly remove students who are behaving in a reckless manner with tools or equipment.
- Always wear potholders when handling hot items. Allow trays and pans to cool before passing out food to students.

### **Safe Food Handling**

- Time your projects so that foods do not sit at room temperature for more than two hours. The "danger zone" for rapid bacterial growth is between 40-140 degrees Fahrenheit, i.e. room temperature. Pick up foods from the kitchen right before you begin the project and return leftovers upon completion. Do not allow students to "save" perishable foods to eat later in the day.
- Don't sample food products prepared with raw eggs. Even one tasty spoonful of cookie batter could harbor dangerous bacteria. Recipes that call for raw eggs, such as eggnog or homemade ice milk, should use an egg substitute that has been pasteurized.

## **HEALTHFUL COOKING ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS**

Preparing the following food items gives children a chance to create a unique recipe, choosing the amounts and types of ingredients they need as they pass through the line.

### **Yogurt Sundaes**

Low fat vanilla yogurt (fresh or frozen), fresh fruit in season, canned fruit, raisins and other dried fruits, chopped nuts, sunflower seeds, toasted oats, wheat germ

### **Mini-Pizzas**

English muffin or bagel halves, prepared pizza or pasta sauce, vegetable toppings (sliced mushrooms, onions, peppers, sliced olives, broccoli florets, etc.), pineapple chunks, grated part-skim mozzarella cheese

### **Healthy Nachos**

Baked tortilla chips, refried beans (heated), grated reduced-fat cheddar cheese, grated zucchini, cooked corn, chopped lettuce or fresh spinach, diced tomatoes, salsa, low fat plain yogurt

### **Whole Wheat Bread Art**

Whole-wheat roll dough (one roll per child), sunflower seeds, chopped nuts, dried fruit



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Source: "Feeding Kids Newsletters"  
<http://nutritionforkids.com>

*This website is an excellent resource for ideas on how to teach nutrition to children.*