



What's Cooking? Getting Kids into the Kitchen

By Pamela Brill | March 13th, 2020



It's the age-old question you are faced with at the end of each day: "what's for dinner?" And if you have fussy eaters that only take their pasta plain—and don't even mention vegetables!—it's especially trying to create a nutritious meal that is may only result in a few bites.

To help make family dinners a bit more enjoyable, experts agree that involving your kids in meal planning and preparation is a surefire way to ensure a clean plate. Adopting healthy cooking and eating habits at a young age can translate into smarter food choices, an adventurous palette and a willingness to try new foods well into adulthood. Time to grab your shopping list, pack up the kids and get started!

[Shop and Play](#)

When it's time to restock the fridge and pantry, wrangling little ones while managing a shopping cart is probably one of the last things you want to do. But, as University of Louisville Physicians Pediatric Specialists registered dietician Susan Wilson says, making the effort now is worth it in the long run. "I know that it is much easier and faster to go grocery shopping without a young child in tow," she admits. "But if you want to start the process of reducing 'picky' eating, then take your child to the grocery store occasionally."

Once there, head for the produce section and turn an ordinary chore into a sensory learning experience. For preschoolers, let them touch and hold different fruits and vegetables and then take things a step further. "Talk about the colors, and let them make stories using the fruits and vegetables as characters," offers Wilson. Ask older kids to tear off a produce bag and decide on which items to bring home; a little encouragement in this department goes a long way. "Talk them up, and tell them how much of a help they are being," she adds.

Another way to get kids engaged in meal planning is to help them visualize their dinner before heading out to buy the ingredients. Wilson recommends visiting [ChooseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov), printing out a blank MyPlate template and letting them fill in and color the plate with foods they'd like to eat. Check out the template featuring a plate that's divided by food groups, enabling kids to see what a well-balanced meal looks like. This gives you an opportunity to help guide their decision making when it comes to food selection.

Prep 101; Minding Picky Eaters

Once you have unpacked your shopping bags, let your child feel like he's in charge by giving him a specific task for getting dinner on the table. If you're not sure where to start, consult the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics ([eatrightfood.org](https://www.eatrightfood.org)) for guidance on age-appropriate kitchen tasks. These range from rinsing produce and clearing tabletops for ages 3-5, to boiling pasta and vegetables and slicing and chopping vegetables for ages 10-12. "I recently taught my 10-year-old about different knives: what they are each used for and how to safely use them," shares Wilson. "I showed her how to chop and cut in different ways and the proper hand position to prevent cutting herself."

Even after guiding kids through the process of creating a meal from start to finish, you may still have to deal with a noncompliant eater. But before you point a finger, take a closer look and make sure that you aren't the one who is turning up her nose at Brussel sprouts. "If you want your child to eat a certain way, you need to model it," says Wilson. "If you want your child to eat veggies, be prepared to eat them yourself. This is one of the most effective ways to prevent selective eating."

Cultivating a Future Foodie

Children that have food allergies or other dietary restrictions may present an entirely different set of obstacles, but understand that their attitude toward eating is not necessarily intentional. "I explain to my patients and parents that this is likely a self-protective mechanism and not

something they are doing on purpose to be difficult,” says Wilson. “Their children may have a true, underlying distrust of unfamiliar or new foods, even if they may not be aware of it.”

To counteract a negative relationship with food, she stresses increasing kids’ involvement in meal prep and—yes—taking them to the grocery store as often as possible. For older kids that are aware of their allergies to certain ingredients, teach them to read labels on packaging so they can know which foods to avoid. Wilson did this with her own daughter who has severe peanut and tree nut allergies. “I taught her to look for the words ‘nuts’ and ‘peanuts’ on a food label well before she could read proficiently,” she says. “Not only has this helped her feel more confident and less afraid, but it has reduced my anxiety because I know that when she is away from me, she has the necessary skills to avoid what she is allergic to.”

As a general rule of thumb, allow your kids to have some say in their food intake and you’ll have them coming to the table with a hearty appetite. “By letting them have some control, it can really help increase the variety in their diet and reduce anxiety,” concludes Wilson.

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