



Cooking with Preschool Children

Cooking to Promote Development and Learning

Cooking is not only a fun, engaging activity for children, but one that has been used for years as an important teaching and development tool for all ages.

Social-Emotional Development – Hands-on cooking activities help children develop pride and confidence in their skills and abilities. The act of following a recipe can encourage self-direction and independence, while also teaching children to follow directions and use thinking skills to problem solve.

Physical Development – Chopping, squeezing, spreading, and mixing are all cooking skills that help develop a child's small muscle control and eye-hand coordination. It's impossible to separate hands-on cooking activities from physical development for young children.

Cognitive Development – Cooking inspires children's curiosity, thinking, and problem solving, offering new opportunities to make predictions and observations. Additionally, cooking offers authentic opportunities for students to understand and apply their knowledge of measuring, one-to-one correspondence, numbers, and counting. As they follow a recipe, children organize ingredients, follow a sequence, and carry out multiple directions.

Language Development – With its own vocabulary, cooking is a great opportunity for language development. Take advantage of opportunities for children to match pictures to words and articulate questions inspired by their new experiences.

Connections to Content Areas

Mathematics

- Number concepts
- One-to-one correspondence
- Simple addition
- Patterning (layered salads, kabobs)
- Measurement
- Data collection, organization, and representation (voting on who wants a particular recipe or ingredient)
- Simple fractions (half, whole, quarter)

Arts

- Drawing/painting fresh seasonal products
- Pictorial recipes
- Edible art

Science

- Life science (growing food in the garden)
- Physical science investigation (changing forms – liquids, solids, gases)
- Making predictions and observations

Social Studies

- Share family recipes
- Discover the important role of farmers in communities

Literacy

- Vocabulary and language development
- Children's literature
- Recipe cards



Tips for Cooking with Preschool Children

The Teacher's Role

- Engaging children in conversation
- Verbalizing and describing what children are doing
- Discussing where foods come from
- Posing questions to encourage children to articulate what they are doing
- Making observations
- Posing questions for children to analyze and solve
- Modeling positive attitudes and behaviors.

Selecting Recipes for Young Children

- Are the hands-on skills age/developmentally appropriate?
- Do you have access to needed appliances?
- Do you have adequate supervision?
- Does the recipe connect with children's interests or classroom projects?
- Does the recipe promote healthy food choices?
- Does the recipe feature seasonal and local products children can find in the garden or on a local farm?
- Is the recipe culturally relevant?
- Is the recipe affordable for all families, and does it use familiar ingredients they have at home?

Introducing Recipes to Children

1. Prepare a simple recipe chart with illustrations of each step
2. Have examples of ingredients in their raw form
3. Have all necessary equipment and ingredients prepped and available
4. Read the recipe aloud, discussing each step
5. Discuss rules and/or safety considerations and have children identify these for specific steps
6. Include all children in the clean-up process



Recipe Ideas for Preschool Children

- Veggies and fruit with different dips or sauces – Allow children to cut fruits and veggies when possible and mix their own dips.
- Layered yogurt parfaits with local fruits – Children create their own parfaits and practice sequencing.
- Garden “roll ups” (lettuce, Napa cabbage, tortillas) – Filled with child’s choice of veggies, sauces, herbs, etc.
- Boats – Cucumber, bell pepper, or summer squash – children hollow out their own boat and fill with cream cheese, herbs, other veggies, etc. If you have access to an oven, you can take this recipe to another level and fill hollowed veggies with rice, beans, cheese, etc. and bake. Make sure each child’s boat is labeled as their own.
- Fruit and veggie insects – Similar idea to boats, but inverted. Apple lady bugs (1/2 apple, cream cheese to hold on raisin spots), cucumber caterpillars (small pickling cucumbers sliced lengthwise, children decorate with finely chopped veggies, using dip or cream cheese as “glue”).
- Mashed potatoes or winter squash – Pre-cook potatoes or winter squash so that children can cut and mash them easily. As a class, everyone can participate in making butter (heavy cream and salt in a plastic, well-sealed jar. Take turns shaking until solid separates from liquid).
- Number or rainbow Salad – Children use counting skills to build their own salad. Children can rip lettuce or spinach leaves, cut cherry tomatoes/cucumbers/green pepper/summer squash, etc. and make their own dressing. Some harder veggies such as carrots can be made into “ribbons” using a peeler. The more choices children have the better, so offer them a variety of ingredients for their salad. For a rainbow salad, have a variety of colorful veggies and ingredients for children to choose from.
- Spinach Bread – If you have access to an oven, this is a fun recipe. Have a piece of pre-made dough (pizza dough works well) for each child. Make sure to talk about how it was made and where the ingredients came from. Each child can knead and roll their own dough. Encourage the use of hands so that you don’t have to sterilize rolling pins and tools between uses. Spread dough as flat as possible and top with spinach, cheese, a small amount of olive oil, and salt and pepper. Children can roll up or fold the dough as they choose to “hide the secret ingredients.”



Cooking Abilities of Young Children

Two-year-olds are learning to use the large muscles in their arms. Try activities such as:

- **scrubbing** vegetables and fruits
- **carrying** unbreakable items to the table
- **dipping** foods
- **washing and tearing** lettuce and salad greens
- **breaking** bread into pieces

Three-year-olds are learning to use their hands. Try activities such as:

- **pouring** liquids into batter (you measure first)
- **mixing** batter or other dry and wet ingredients together
- **shaking** a drink in a closed container
- **spreading** butters or spreads
- **kneading** dough
- **washing** vegetables and fruit
- **serving** foods
- **putting** things in the trash after cooking or after a meal

Four and five-year-olds are learning to control small muscles in their fingers. Try activities such as:

- **juicing** oranges, lemons, and limes
- **peeling** some fruits and vegetables (bananas and even onions)
- **mashing** soft fruits and vegetables
- **scrubbing** vegetables (potatoes, mushrooms)
- **cutting** soft foods with a plastic knife (mushrooms, hard-boiled eggs)
- **pressing** cookie cutters
- **measuring** dry ingredients
- **cracking** open/breaking eggs
- **beating** eggs with an egg beater
- **setting** the table
- **wiping** up after cooking
- **clearing** the table after a meal

Source: California WIC, *Cooking Abilities of Young Children*, <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks>.



Best Practices for Cooking with Children in Licensed Child Care

Cooking has always been an important teaching tool in early childhood, but many teachers are intimidated by the rules and regulations around cooking with children in a licensed child care setting. This list of best practices should help take some of the mystery out of licensing and environmental health rules and regulations.

General guidelines for having children prepare food in the classroom:

- Ensure proper hand washing.
- Clean, rinse and sanitize all surfaces used for food prep and eating.
- Each student should prepare their own individual serving.
- If children are sharing utensils or tools, they should be cleaned and sanitized between uses.
- Adults cutting/preparing ingredients or food in the classroom should use a designated food prep area in the classroom that consists of a cleanable counter or table and a sink. If the sink is used for any other purposes than food prep it needs to be cleaned and disinfected with a 500-800 ppm bleach solution before being used.
- Children should not handle sharp utensils.
- If adults are using sharp utensils, such as knives, they need to keep them on their person.
- Water for drinking or cooking needs to come from an approved kitchen or a sink that is designated solely for potable water (no hand washing).
- Cooking over heat in the classroom is not allowed because of fire code.
- In child care centers, children are not allowed in the kitchen.
- Children should be prepared ahead of time on what to expect and what is expected of them.

For questions, contact your county Department of Health and Human Services.