

FitFuture

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Series on Fitness & Nutrition for Families

Want Your Kids to Eat Better? Let Them Cook!

By Jennifer Kerr, MS, RD

The kitchen can be a fun and exciting place. Think back to when you were young and mom or dad was busy cooking up a storm. Surely you were fascinated by the cooking noises, sights like steam and colorful foods, and don't forget the delicious aromas filling up the house. Eventually these efforts resulted in a wonderful family meal. If you get them turned on to it at a young age, your children will grow into talented cooks – you may even have the next “Rachel Ray” or “Bobby Flay” on your hands!

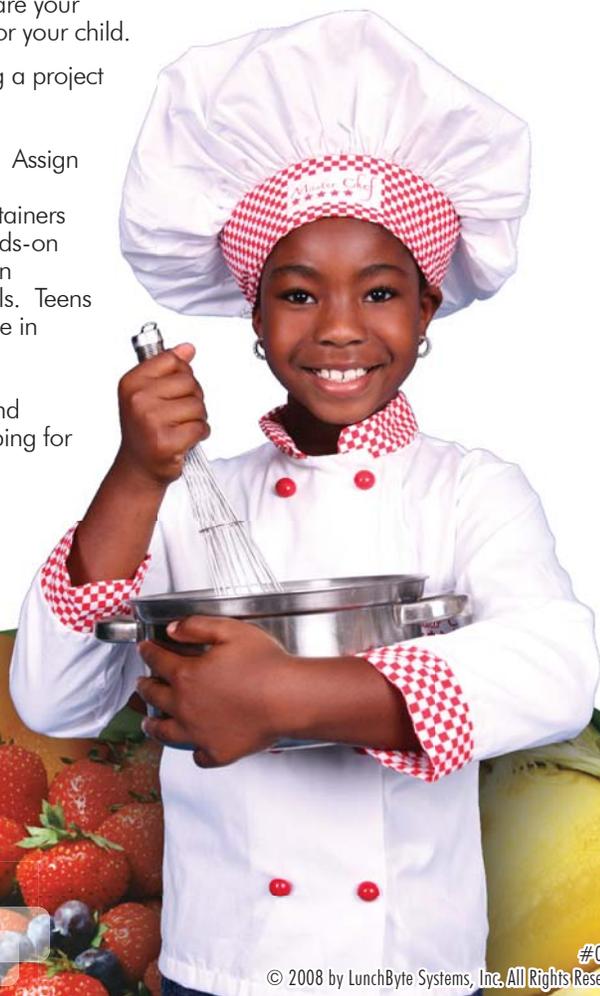
Cooking can teach your children more than how to prepare a recipe. Here are just four reasons why cooking with your children will benefit you both:

- Children are receptive to discussing nutrition while immersed in hands-on food tasks. Preparing meals and snacks together creates the perfect environment to talk about healthy food choices and building balanced meals.
- Children are more likely to be adventurous about trying new foods when they took part in preparing it.
- Cooking allows you to teach your children (without them even knowing it) and to share your memories about family members and family recipes, while creating new memories for your child.
- Cooking allows children to learn about responsibility, following directions and seeing a project through to completion.

There is a little chef in every child. No matter their age, kids have a place in the kitchen. Assign your children to age-appropriate tasks and take precautions to keep them safe from hot surfaces and sharp utensils. Toddlers can use their imaginations and play with pots, containers and spoons while pretending to cook with you. Preschoolers can begin to get more hands-on with simple tasks like counting ingredients and stirring a batter. School-aged children can measure and combine ingredients while learning about recipes and using their math skills. Teens can advance their skills and try new adventurous cuisines. They can even take a solo role in preparing a meal for the family.

So get your kids involved today. Start by talking about their favorite meals and snacks and decide if there is one that your child can take part in. Take things a step further by shopping for the ingredients together.

Remember that even adults have a hard time being neat and tidy in the kitchen. Be patient and count on a little extra mess when cooking with young children. Try to keep calm and maintain a light and pleasant mood. Let your child know that “mistakes and messes will happen, but we should be careful and always clean up after ourselves.” Be sure to keep your children interested in cooking by offering many compliments on their job well done!



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