

INSPIRING GRANDCHILDREN TO BECOME GRAND COOKS



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Introduction

Cooking calls for a variety of skills. Cooking involves planning and organization so that all dishes are ready at the same time. Cooking requires understanding how to safely handle food. It also involves judgment about when food has been cooked enough or how to adapt recipes. Cooking allows for creativity of combining flavors and textures. It also builds technical skills like slicing, dicing, and mixing.

Getting children involved with cooking supports their development in many ways. Cooking helps children develop fine and gross motor skills. It inspires creativity and problem solving. Cooking can also help children practice following directions and gain independence. Language and literacy can develop through talking and reading about what they are cooking. Cooking increases children's confidence and can increase their willingness to try and ultimately eat more fruits and vegetables. Learning cooking skills at an early age has lasting impact on attitudes about cooking, skills, diet quality, and health in adulthood.

Children need more time in the kitchen

Parents, usually mothers, are the primary source for teaching children how to cook. However, changes in culture, family structure, and food costs have led to changes in cooking at home. Between 1965 and



the early 2000s, cooking at home decreased. Even though cooking at home is on the rise, children are not usually helping.

Mothers report extra stress when children are in the kitchen because they feel a lack of control and that children are a distraction. They also report safety concerns and not wanting to clean up messes. In the past, school programs taught cooking skills, but fewer people report learning to cook in school. Research shows transportation, cost, and disability can prevent children from taking cooking classes outside of school. With fewer occasions to learn and practice cooking, there are concerns that cooking skills will be lost in younger generations.

Grandparents can teach cooking skills

Grandparents have ever more important and varied roles in the lives of their grandchildren.

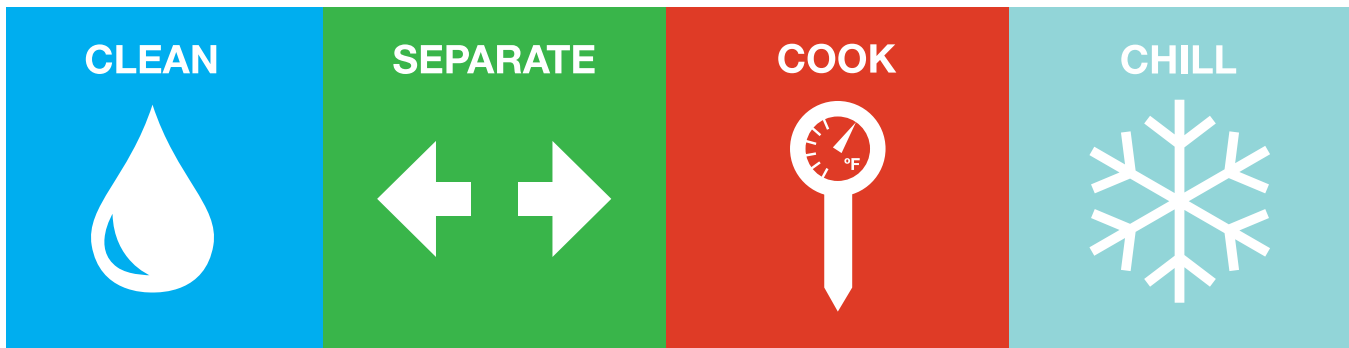


Figure 1. Food Safety Basics

- **CLEAN** - Wash hands and all work surfaces often.
- **SEPARATE** - Keep raw meat, eggs, seafood, and poultry separate from ready-to-eat foods.
- **COOK** - Cook food to the right temperature.
- **CHILL** - Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours.

(United States government, 2023)

It is common for grandparents to provide regular child care, live in multiple-generation households, or have custodial care. In Kentucky, approximately 58,000 children live with their grandparents. The increased presence of grandparents makes them an important resource for cooking skills. While grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to report cooking for or with grandchildren, grandfathers have shown greater comfort with food preparation than grandchildren, particularly grilling. Grandparents do not need to be expert chefs. They just need to share time, patience, and experience with grandchildren.

Benefits of cooking together

The shared experience of cooking benefits grandchildren and grandparents. Working together in the kitchen provides time for meaningful conversation and builds trust. Grandchildren and grandparents can learn more about one another. They can share knowledge and traditions from one generation to the next and create lasting memories. Learning about nutritious foods together can help families change routines in ways that support healthier eating habits.

Cooking together can strengthen relationships and enhance well-being. Grandchildren can learn about family history and benefit from receiving love, support, acceptance, patience, and wisdom. Grandparents can have boosts in brain function and protection against depression. Additionally, sharing cooking skills can provide opportunities that protect against social isolation and help maintain skills for longer independent living.

Ideas for guiding grandchildren through the cooking process

Create ground rules around safety. Children need supervision. Start by checking with parents about safety concerns and boundaries in the kitchen. This ensures everyone is on the same page. Next, teach or review basic food safety rules throughout the cooking process. Figure 1 shows the four steps to food safety – clean, separate, cook, and chill. Grandparents are an important role model for showing and explaining food safety practices like correct hand-washing techniques and checking the temperature of food with a food thermometer. Encourage tasting while cooking but have rules

about no double dipping. Have everyone pull back long hair and wash their hands. Be sure to clean all work surface areas and work with children to clean up along the way. If children put fingers in their nose or mouth, remind them to wash their hands. Finally, keep in mind safety risks related to heat, sharp knives or peelers, and electric cooking utensils. Set expectations about tasks children can complete independently and those that require help or supervision.

Set them up for success. Children of all ages can help with food preparation, table setup, and cleanup. With very young children, the experience is all about senses and teaching safe kitchen practices. Over time, children will gain skills and independence. Table 1 shows a general idea of age-appropriate skills. This can be particularly helpful if it has been a while since grandparents were in the kitchen with grandchildren. Skills in Table 1 are organized by age group and build upon one another. A 6-year-old child can try everything listed on that level and above. Selecting tasks that match a child's skill level can build confidence and limit frustration. It is important to remember each child develops at their own pace.

Engage in conversation. Focus on listening as well as talking. Describe what you are doing. Talk about where the food or recipe came from. Ask children questions and help them problem solve. Teach them about safety in the kitchen. Share observations throughout each food preparation step. Telling stories can create and build strong bonds.

Work through the mess. It is important to remember, children need help learning new skills. One can expect some messy moments during the learning process. Doing things together over and over will supply the practice and guidance needed to master a skill. As cooking skills improve, there should be less mess. Learning how to clean up messes is also an important life skill for children to learn. The willingness and time to work through messes in the kitchen is an opportunity for grandparents to jump in and help parents.



Make it a habit. Any amount of cooking together is helpful, but more is better. Regular opportunities to prepare meals together allow children to learn and practice the variety of skills needed to confidently. Schedule and plan daily, weekly, or monthly times to cook with grandchildren. This can be in person, or with a little preparation, through a video call. Writing down notes about the recipes made together can create a record of memories of the process for favorite dishes. Consider a special notebook or shared electronic file to record who was present during the cooking process, changes made to the recipe, where the recipe came from, what was most enjoyable about making or eating the dish, and any other memorable moments of the cooking process.

Conclusion

Children need more time and guidance in the kitchen to reap the lifelong benefits of knowing how to cook. Grandparents are a valuable resource for teaching cooking skills. The special moments that occur when cooking together can supply benefits for both grandparents and grandchildren. Sharing stories about family recipes exercises memory, gives children a sense of connection, and passes family heritage from generation to generation. Most of all, giving children time, space, and support to gain confidence in the kitchen yields priceless experiences that will last a lifetime.

Resources

For more information about how children benefit from time in the kitchen, check out this fact sheet from Utah State University Extension.

- Malan, C., Bevan, S., & Savoie-Roskos, M. R. (2022). The benefits of including kids in the kitchen [Fact sheet]. Utah State University Extension. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_curall/2288/

For more information about food safety practices, check out this website.

Table 1. Suitable cooking skills by age		
Age Group	Cooking Skills	Kitchen Skills
Under 2 years	Very young children are not quite ready to help in the kitchen. They can play nearby with pots, pans, or storage containers as well as toy foods or kitchen sets. Talk about what is going on in the kitchen.	
2-3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wash fruit and vegetables Knead and mix with hands Tear or break foods into pieces Use a rolling pin Use a cookie cutter Roll mixtures into a ball Squeeze lemons and limes 	Put things in the trash
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add ingredients to a bowl Stir and mix Mash foods Cut, chop, or slice with plastic, kid-safe knives Spread butter with a butter knife Scrape batter down a bowl Brush oils on food with a pastry brush Cut green onions and herbs with blunt kitchen scissors Peel fruits and vegetables with peeler Deseed fruits and vegetables with a spoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put things away Fill drink cups Help set the table Move dirty dishes to the sink Wipe tables and countertops Explore the garden
6-7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measure ingredients (with help) Crack eggs in a bowl Shuck corn Snap green beans Grease pans Peel fruit with fingers Skewer foods Bread, flour, and dip foods Sprinkle ingredients Juice lemon, lime, or orange using a juicer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make guided menu choices Gather ingredients Load dishwasher Wash dishes Help dig, plant, and harvest the garden Help find items while grocery shopping

Age Group	Cooking Skills	Kitchen Skills
8-9 years	Weigh and measure ingredients Beat eggs Open cans with can opener Use food thermometer to check temperature of food Use an oven or microwave Pound foods with a kitchen mallet Pour from a container Drain canned foods Shake liquids in a closed container Use a hand mixer	Set the table Store and refrigerate leftovers Help plan gardens
10 years or older	Follow a recipe Cut, slice, and chop with kitchen knives Simmer ingredients on stovetop Boil pasta Bake foods in the oven	Once children show they can follow kitchen safety rules, they can begin doing things on their own. Become the expert of a family recipe so that it passes down generations

Table adapted from Dean and colleagues (2021) and Ellis (2022).

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