

Little Hands Make Great Holiday Helpers

“Let me help, Momma,” begs a three-year-old as her Mom struggles to prepare dinner, pack lunches and stir up holiday cookies for the church cookie exchange. The last thing on this Mom’s mind is to let her three-year-old get in the middle of the flurry of activity.

Yet, young children can do many things in the kitchen to help. Involve them while they’re young and they are more likely to help without a fuss as they get older. Besides, working together allows you time to together which is a precious commodity in many homes.

These skills are age appropriate for children helping in the kitchen. No two children are alike developmentally, so cooking activities must be tailored to each child. Also remember, safe food handling practices are important for all age groups.

All Ages Can Learn To:

- Wash hands in hot, soapy water before beginning food preparation.
- Wash hands, utensils, and counter surfaces after handling raw meat, poultry or fish and before preparing other foods.
- Keep the kitchen clean.
- Make sure perishable foods are never out of refrigeration over two hours.

2 1/2-3 Year Olds Can:

- Wash fruits and vegetables
- Peel bananas
- Spread with a knife (soft onto firm)
- Slice soft foods with table knife (cooked potatoes, bananas)
- Pour
- Stir batters
- Retrieve cans from low cabinets
- Use rotary egg beater (for a short time)
- Measure (e.g., chocolate chips into 1 cup measure)

4-5 Year Olds Can:

- Grease pans
- Open packages
- Peel carrots
- Set table (with instruction)
- Snip fresh herbs for salads or cooking
- Place toppings on pizza or snacks
- Wash and tear lettuce for salad, separate broccoli and cauliflower
- Shape dough for cookies or hamburger patties

CAUTION: Children should not put their hands in their mouths while handling raw hamburger meat. It can carry harmful bacteria. Wash their hands after shaping patties.

6-8 Year Olds Can:

- Take part in planning part or entire meal
- Set table (with less supervision)
- Find ingredients in cabinet or spice rack
- Shred cheese or vegetables
- Use microwave, blender, or toaster oven (with previous instruction)
- Present prepared food to family at table
- Make a salad
- Measure ingredients
- Garnish food
- Roll and shape cookies

9-12 Year Olds Can:

- Depending on previous experience, plan and prepare an entire meal.

While in the kitchen teach your children good food safety.

1. Always work with clean hands and equipment.
2. Use the refrigerator to cool food when preparing in advance – not the counter. Leave space around each warm container so that cool air can reach all sides. Just having food in a refrigerator doesn't guarantee that the center of a thick mass will cool to 40° F in a safe period of time.
3. Don't leave leftovers sit on the table after the meal is over. Covering food doesn't stop the growth of bacteria.
4. Keep cold foods refrigerated right up to serving time.
5. Don't taste foods to determine if they are safe to eat.
6. Use hot pads to remove dishes from the microwave. While some dishes may not appear too hot to your touch, children have more sensitive skin.

Working together in the kitchen is a wonderful way to spend time together during the holidays, get necessary tasks complete and build your children's self esteem. Enjoy the holidays and your children.