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Create holiday memories with kids in the kitchen

Ah, the holidays. For many families, this means spending time in the kitchen preparing tasty family recipes. It also is the perfect time to teach children about cooking, nutrition and food safety.

Barbara Brown, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension food specialist, said letting your children help in the kitchen not only opens their minds to trying new foods, but it also can boost their confidence.

“Children get excited when they see friends and family enjoying what they created in the kitchen. It gives them a sense of pride,” Brown said. “And, spending time in the kitchen cooking with your kids helps them learn the importance of nutrition and develops healthy eating habits early on.”

Before you break out the mixing bowls and turn on the oven, start with some safety precautions and ground rules. Which pieces of kitchen equipment the child can use will depend upon their age. Be sure to talk about the importance of washing hands before getting started on a cooking project, as well as keeping a clean work surface.

Brown suggests starting with the basics, such as cracking an egg or gathering the ingredients for that favorite family recipe.

“Although the child may not realize it, measuring ingredients is a great introduction to some math concepts,” she said. “Talk about the importance of correctly measuring each ingredient so the recipe turns out just right.”

Based on the child’s age and abilities, assign different tasks related to the recipe. Children ages 3 to 5 can stir together simple ingredients, press cookie cutters into pre-rolled dough, snap beans or tear lettuce for salad.

Measuring ingredients, taking the seeds out of winter squash, greasing a pan, cracking eggs and using a vegetable peeler are age-appropriate kitchen skills for 6- to 7-year-old children.

Eight and 9-year-olds are capable of using a can opener, juicing citrus fruits, checking food temperature with a thermometer and using the mixer.

Older children can do more advanced jobs in the kitchen, such as slicing or chopping vegetables, microwaving foods, simmering ingredients on the stove and baking foods in the oven.

It is important to help children build confidence in the kitchen and help them master cooking and baking skills over time.

“Traditional family recipes are important all year long, but especially during the holidays,” Brown said. “Spending time in the kitchen with your children will help ensure these recipes continue for generations to come. Plus, you’ll be creating lifelong memories.”

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