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Let kids help out in the kitchen

With the holidays just around the corner, many families are planning special meals that include many traditional favorites. One way to help keep these family traditions alive is to get your kids in the kitchen with you.

Not only will your children gain an appreciation for some time-honored recipes and family traditions, they also will develop more healthy eating habits, said Jenni Klufa, assistant state specialist with [Oklahoma State University Extension](https://extension.okstate.edu/)’s [Community Nutrition Education Program](https://extension.okstate.edu/county/tulsa/community-nutrition-education.html).

“Obesity rates are up for both children and adults in Oklahoma. Youth obesity rates are nearly 22% and the adult obesity rate is 36.5%,” Klufa said. “Healthy meal preparation is a vital life skill that should take root in childhood. Fortunately, research indicates that when youth are involved in preparing meals, they’re likely to eat more nutrient-rich foods. The [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](https://www.eatright.org/) offers guidance regarding age-appropriate skills for children to help them gain an appreciation for cooking and eating healthy.”

Children ages 3 to 5 will need close adult supervision since their motor skills are still developing. However, the children will feel a sense of pride being able to help out with simple tasks. Klufa said this is a great time to teach youngsters the importance of being clean in the kitchen and always using clean utensils and wiping down surfaces. Here are some ways they can help:

* Wash hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds. Try singing Happy Birthday or Twinkle Twinkle Little Star twice as they wash hands.
* Wash fruits and vegetables in the sink with cool water.
* Wipe the table.
* Stir together easy-to-make batters.
* “Paint” cooking oil with a clean pastry brush on bread, asparagus and other foods.
* Cut out cookies, but do not eat the dough.

Older children, ages 6-7, have more fine-tuned motor skills so they can handle more detailed work. However, they still will need adult supervision and food safety reminders. Some age appropriate tasks include:

* Use a peeler to peel raw potatoes, ginger, mangoes and other washed fruits and vegetables.
* Break eggs into a bowl and remember to wash hands afterwards.
* Scoop out avocados after sliced in half by an adult.
* Deseed tomatoes and cooled, roasted peppers with a spoon.
* Snap green beans.
* Load the dishwasher.
* Shuck corn and rinse before cooking.
* Rinse and cut parsley or green onions with clean, blunt kitchen scissors.

“There’s a wide range of skills in children ages 8 to 9,” Klufa said. “Depending on the child, tailor tasks to each child’s maturity level. Also, reinforce the importance of food safety and wiping down surfaces.”

Age-appropriate skills for this age group include:

* Open cans with a can opener.
* Put leftovers in shallow containers and refrigerate within two hours (one hour if it’s warmer than 90 degrees).
* Pound chicken on a cutting board. Note: Always use a separate cutting board for ready-to-eat and raw foods, and be sure to wash hands with warm, soapy water after handling raw meats and chicken.
* Beat eggs.
* Check the temperature of meat with a food thermometer – it's like a science experiment!
* Juice a lemon or orange.

Klufa said children 10 to 12 years old can work fairly independently in the kitchen, but still need adult supervision for some tasks.

“Before turning them loose in the kitchen, assess whether they can follow basic kitchen safety rules such as turning pan handles over counters to avoid bumping into them, unplugging electrical appliances, using knives safely and using the oven or microwave appropriately,” she said.

Pre-teens likely are able to handle these tasks in the kitchen, with some adult supervision:

* Boil pasta.
* Microwave foods.
* Follow a recipe, including reading each step and measuring ingredients accurately.
* Bake foods in the oven.
* Simmer ingredients on the stove.
* Slice or chop vegetables.

“Spending time with your kids in the kitchen is a great investment. You’ll not only create great memories together, you’ll also help them develop a love of cooking and eating healthy,” Klufa said.