



## Eat Better, Eat Together Month: How to get your kids involved in meal prep

Cooking can be about much more than simply feeding ourselves – it can be a joyful activity that reduces stress, encourages well-balanced eating, and brings people together. For children, cooking can be a great opportunity to learn lessons in math, chemistry, nutrition, and botany, as well. Here are some tips for instilling a love for preparing meals in your children by starting them early, and creating positive memories that will follow them throughout their lives.

### **Get Them Their Own Tools & Supplies**

Make meal prep time special by giving your kids their own tools. Younger kids can have their own spoon or mixing bowls, in a color that captures their attention. There are special knives and vegetable peelers available for older kids with features like easy-grip handles, and rounded tips to prevent accidental stabbing. Assign age-appropriate tasks to do with these tools, like washing veggies or mixing ingredients for the younger kids, and slicing or peeling for the older ones, teaching them proper techniques along the way. Don't forget the accessories! Buy or create personalized aprons to incorporate dress-up play into the experience.

### **Grow Their Love of Food**

There's nothing that instills pride in your food more than growing it yourself. Start a garden and have the children help decide what to plant, then teach them to assist with the maintenance and harvesting. This is a great way to not only grow food, but to sneak in some botany lessons as well! Plant easy to grow and high output foods like tomatoes, squash, and peppers to see fast results and get kids excited. Grow some herbs and teach the kids the difference between rosemary, sage, and basil, and what kind of dishes they work well in.

If the size of your yard is a problem, or you don't have a yard at all, check to see if there are any community gardens in your area. Community gardens are wonderful places to meet other gardeners, and you may find some people who will happily trade the results of your bounty for whatever delicious produce they grew.

### **Learn How to Cook Favorite Take-out Meals**

Turn take-out night into cook-in night by recreating your favorite pizza, Asian dishes, or hamburgers and fries at home. Show the kids the ingredients that go into each dish, and have them help with the prep work. This is also a great

opportunity for a nutrition lesson, by explaining how when you prepare your own food, you have control over the quality of meat you buy, the amount of oil or salt used, and the freshness of the vegetables. They may discover that making their favorite take-out meals at home may take more time, but that the combination of fresh ingredients and their own loving preparation results in a more delicious meal!

## Bake in Some Math Lessons

Baking together is a great way for kids to learn about measurements, with a delicious reward at the end of the lesson! Even very young children can be involved by letting them pour ingredients in the bowl, or adding decorative elements to the finished product. Let your children be in charge of filling the measuring cups and spoons, and talk about the various sizes and how they relate to each other. Make a game out of identifying various ways to equal a certain measurement, like 1 cup. Winner gets to lick the bowl!

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## Eat the Rainbow

Head to the produce section of your local grocery store or farmer's market and assign each child a color or two. Let them pick out a fruit or vegetable in that shade, then decide together how they'll eat it. Try veggies both raw and cooked, or help them make a delicious fruit salad and talk about the ways the flavors play off each other. By letting your child pick the produce themselves, they'll take more ownership of it and be excited to turn it into a snack or meal with you later.

## Choose Recipes Together

No parent likes feeling like a short-order cook, having to please a variety of picky eaters multiple times a day. Get your children excited about the menu by having them help choose new recipes to create. Flip through cookbooks together at your local library, or head to the internet for an unlimited treasure trove of new ideas—there are several websites dedicated just to recipes for kids. Depending on your schedule, decide how many times a week you'll work in a new recipe, and create a calendar with your child highlighting when this will be.

This is also an ideal time to teach them lessons about the level of difficulty in preparing certain meals, how long different foods take to cook, and the price of different meats and vegetables. For instance, maybe pot roast with all the trimmings is possible to make on Sunday, but not Wednesday night after soccer practice. That's all valuable information that will serve them well into meal-prepping as adults.