



# A Recipe for Family Learning...

## Cooking Together

By Wendy Jacobson

**M**any parents cringe at the idea of letting their kids help with meals because of the mess, safety concerns and not knowing when or how to get started. But by overcoming the reluctance to cook with your children you open up a world of new opportunities to teach them about food and nutrition while having quality time.

The value of cooking together and teaching your child to be independent in the kitchen can't be overstated. Patricia Thoney, a nutritionist at Cornell University, says that from an educational standpoint your kitchen is a virtual integrated training lab combining math, science, culture, language, communication skills, motor skills and artistry. "Kids develop a sense of confidence, cooperation and self-expression that's hard to duplicate elsewhere," she says.

Laura Lynn Iacono, a nutritionist and owner of One Potato Two Tomato in Albertson agrees. "Cooking together is the best way to encourage kids to have a positive attitude about food. Eating should be a joy, not a chore and food should be appealing. When nutritious food tastes great, kids learn to eat less junk. Teaching them to cook is the best way for them to understand what a portion is, what proteins, fats and carbohydrates are and how to combine food groups to make a meal."

And children who are active participants in cooking the meal are more invested in the outcome: eating it. Kids who like to eat, like to cook and vice versa.

### *How and When to Begin*

If you're wondering when to get started, Paula Gottlieb of Lil Chefs.com Special Events in Westbury, which specializes in children's cooking parties, says that she works with kids as young as two. "By age four, most kids are able to help make dough. They can measure, sift and knead. I

like to start with gingerbread because the spicy smells add to the sensory experience," Gottlieb says. "By age seven kids can begin learning knife skills and cooking with heat under adult supervision."

Iacono says with little ones the important concept to reinforce is that food is fun, like making smiley faces on pancakes. She says a basic timeline is:

- 3- to 5-year-olds start with simple tasks like stirring and pouring.
- 6- to 8-year-olds can do non-stove jobs like peeling vegetables, some chopping, measuring and helping to follow recipes.

- By age 10 they can use the stove with supervision.

- By 11 to 14 they should be able to cook on the stove independently.

Of course every child is different, so gauge your child's maturity. Remember kids' motor skills are still developing, so there are going to be spills. Stay calm. It's all part of the learning process.

### *Safety: Clean, Hot, Sharp*

Teaching safety is essential. That's why Chef Gerard Molloy of the Viking Cooking School of Garden City believes in teaching proper knife skills. "The days of using a tiny paring knife for every cutting and chopping task are over. These kids are watching chefs on the Food Network and are inspired"

He starts preschoolers with soft foods and small knives until their skills increase. "With experience, they learn to work independently," Molloy says. "That's what develops their self-esteem and their sense of satisfaction."

In addition to basic safety, hygiene is Gottlieb's foremost concern. "My mantra is 'Wash your hands.' My goal is to make cleanliness instinctive," she says. "Communication in the kitchen is also key. I teach them by example by always announcing to my helpers when I open the oven or take hot pans off the stove."

Also, since accidents tend to happen in chaotic, noisy kitchens, minimize any commotion. And remember, kitch-

ens are designed ergonomically for adults. Kids should use stools so they're working at the correct height to the counters.

### *Food Is Good*

Being a positive role model regarding food is essential to raising healthy eaters. Observe your own reaction to cooking. If preparing meals or eating them is drudgery for you, your children will tend to reflect your attitude.

"You have to walk the talk," says Iacono. "You can't preach about nutrition while eating a bag of chips. Keep presenting healthy choices. And don't just ask what they want to eat. Kids only know a few simple foods and they aren't going to ask for something they've never tasted."

Chef Rick Keeley of Amagansett adds: "With one out of every five meals eaten in a car, there's no substitute for taking the time to cook with kids to develop their palate and knowledge about food. It goes right to the core of what home is. We love to do a family project, like creating a Mexican or Thai meal once a month."

### *Self-Expression*

Keeley says when kids get comfortable cooking when they're young, they tend to get innovative as they mature. "Tweens and teens are ambitious and expressive," he says. "They love to go off recipe and get creative with the meal and presentation."

Some younger kids like to wing it, too. Morgan, 8, and Brent Ryan, 11, of Quogue, invite friends home to make mini pizzas with rounds of pizza parlor dough.

"They love to use veggies and herbs from their garden and they go to the store to select other toppings. The boys get very creative," notes their father Dan. "Without fail they always gobble up their own and think it's perfect."

