

Little Kids Cook!

Rebecca A. Swartz, Extension Early Childhood Specialist
Dipti A. Dev, Extension Childhood Health Behaviors Specialist
Natalie Sehi, Extension Educator

Lesson Goal:

Empower families and caregivers to help young children develop healthy habits by engaging them in cooking and food related play activities.

Lesson Objectives:

This lesson will help participants:

- Understand how young children learn about healthy eating habits through cooking and food related play experiences.
- Learn strategies for engaging toddlers and preschoolers in developmentally appropriate cooking and food related play activities that will help them develop knowledge about food and cooking.

Before Meeting:

Read through Leader's and Participant's Guides. Decide which activities to use and gather supplies. (Note: Either Activity 2 or Activity 3 may be completed.) Review the resources listed in the Participant's Guide and print examples you wish to share with participants.

Day of Meeting:

1. Set the tables in an arrangement that allows for small-group discussion.
2. On the tables, provide a copy of the Participant's Guide (HEF615) for each person and pens/pencils.

Teaching Plan:

Begin the lesson using the ideas provided in the "Introduction" section below. Ask participants to share memories of food-related playtimes or cooking experiences from their childhood or from cooking with their own children. Start the conversation by sharing a memory of your own. If the group is talkative, you may ask them to share their memories with a partner.

Introduction:

Has a young child ever toddled over to you with a spoon and empty bowl, lifted the spoon to your mouth and said, "Eat! Yummy!"? Have you seen a child in the sandbox stirring sand in a bucket while saying, "I cook soup!"? Have you seen a curious toddler or preschooler digging through the kitchen cupboards and exploring the pots, pans, and containers they find? These moments of play and exploration are ways that young children let you know they are learning about food and cooking just from watching their caregivers engage in cooking and eating routines.

Young children use their natural curiosity as they explore the world around them, and this includes the experiences of cooking and eating. The early childhood years are a natural time to capitalize on this curiosity and lay a foundation of healthy eating habits.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics released a position statement in 2011 regarding the benchmarks for nutrition in child care. On nutrition education for children and families, the academy stated:

Nutrition education for children and families should be a component of the child care program. Child care providers have the opportunity to incorporate nutrition education into their daily routines with children. Children should develop a basic understanding of the origin of food through books, posters, hands-on experiences, and conversations with providers. Providers can help teach children about food by engaging their senses. Children who taste, smell, and manipulate new foods may be more likely to eat them, especially after repeated exposure. Nutrition education for children can be both formal (e.g., circle time activity) and informal (e.g., mealtime conversations).

The Academy recommended engaging children in food-related activities at times other than mealtimes, when children are more likely to taste foods, which may improve their knowledge about the foods. These early experiences are a foundation upon which children can build positive eating

habits and an interest in food and cooking that will benefit them throughout life.

During this lesson we will explore how young children learn about food and healthy eating habits through cooking and other food-related play experiences. Many opportunities occur daily for you to teach young children about healthful eating habits.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines state that young children learn best through play and hands-on experiences. Each child develops at his/her own pace, so some children will display interest or capabilities to participate in certain types of activities earlier or later than other children of the same age. The activities presented in this lesson are geared towards children ages 2-5 years. You may notice younger toddlers (18-24 months) expressing interest in food and food-related play, such as pretending to cook and talking about the taste of food. Younger children may participate in dramatic play activities such as feeding their dolls or cooking in a play kitchen. Therefore, some of these activities could be used with toddlers under 2 years old. Encourage this "pretend" play (socio-dramatic) as a child begin to express interest.

In this lesson, we will gather ideas for fun activities and practical ways that will make play, cooking, and eating successful and enjoyable learning opportunities for toddlers and preschoolers.

Activity 1 — Bountiful Baskets. Before the meeting, place an assortment of items from the lists below into three baskets. One basket will contain kitchen items, another food containers, and the last food items.

- **Kitchen items** safe for children to explore such as large spoons, butter knives or spreaders, rolling pins, cookie cutters without sharp edges, small pots or pans, spatulas, whisks, mixing bowls, measuring cups and spoons, containers, colander, kitchen scale.
- **Food containers**, emptied and cleaned, such as boxes, egg cartons, and cans (check for sharp edges).
- **Food items** with a variety of colors, textures, and shapes such as fruits and vegetables (pineapple, orange, broccoli, or others).

Introduce the three baskets of items. Show participants the items, and explain that you will be spending the rest of the lesson discussing how children may interact with the items. If the group is large, pass the baskets from table to table or have each table take one of the baskets. If the group is smaller you may wish to go through the baskets as a whole group. Ask participants to complete Handout 1 as the baskets are discussed. Below are possible ways to respond to the questions asked on the handout.

For the kitchen items, participants may suggest that children can practice motor skills such as scooping, pouring, mixing, ladling, and spreading.

For the food containers, participants may suggest that children can pretend to have a grocery store where they are

shopping for food or pretending to put groceries away on a toy shelf or in a toy kitchen.

For the basket of fruits and vegetables, participants may suggest that the children could be encouraged to talk about flavors, colors, textures, shapes, and sizes.

As you discuss the items, encourage participants to brainstorm about what they might say to the children as they play with the items. For example, they could ask a child pretending to feed a doll soup for a very long time, "Is your doll's tummy full?" Or, an adult could look at a label on a food package as the child pretends to shop and say, "This applesauce is made out of apples and cinnamon!" These interactions help children develop healthy habits for cooking, feeding, and shopping.

Note: If small groups were formed for this activity, walk around to each group and listen to the conversations. Ask questions to expand participant discussion, and answer questions as appropriate. Bring the large group back together to share ideas that emerged in each small-group discussion.

Activity 2 — Cooking Together. Prepare a simple snack that young children could enjoy helping you to prepare. Recipes are offered on Handout 2.

If your group is large, break into small groups and have each group prepare a different recipe to share. As the food is prepared, guide the group conversation toward skills children might learn through this cooking activity (e.g., discussing the importance of hand washing before cooking teaches good hygiene; reading the recipe together helps develop beginning literacy skills; measuring ingredients reinforces the concepts of less and more; watching the ingredients change as they are mixed helps observation skills; and describing the color, shapes, texture and taste (salty, sweet) of the food as they eat their snack promotes other skills.

As the group cooks together, model strategies for engaging young children in cooking, such as reminding everyone to wash their hands before handling food and encouraging them to wait to taste the foods until the cooking process is done. Modeling these behaviors helps children learn safe and healthy food preparation rules. By experiencing these rules as participants, the adults will be better able to remember what they will need to explain and model for children.

As you enjoy the snacks together, brainstorm other types of recipes children could prepare alongside adults (measuring and mixing batter for pancakes, using a masher to help smash cooked potatoes, etc.). Encourage participants to note those ideas on Handout 1.

Activity 3 — Recipe Roundup. Handout 3 contains four recipes that children can help an adult prepare. As the groups make the recipes, encourage participants to identify which preparation tasks are appropriate for children, what adults can do to keep children safe during the cooking experience, and discuss the types of questions adults can make to encourage children's thinking during the cooking experience.