



Get cooking!

Sarah West shares some practical tips for settings planning to involve the children in their healthy food programme

There is no such thing as too many cooks when it comes to encouraging young children to help out in the kitchen. Cooking is not only fun and engaging, but can be a valuable learning and development tool during the early years. For example, among the many benefits are:

■ **social-emotional development**

Hands-on cooking activities help children develop confidence in their skills and abilities. Following a basic recipe encourages self-direction and independence, while also teaching children to follow simple directions and solve problems

■ **physical development**

Working with adults in the kitchen can help a child to develop small muscle control and eye-hand co-ordination

■ **cognitive development**

Cooking helps inspire children's curiosity and thinking and encourages them to make predictions and observations. Additionally, it is an opportunity for young children to begin to understand numbers through measuring and the use of simple fractions



Sarah running a cooking session at Bunny Run Childcare Centre in Hellingly, East Sussex

■ **language development**

Kitchen demonstrations are a great opportunity to help expand children's vocabulary. Talk children through each of the activities and ensure they understand which ingredients they're using. Discuss where the food comes from (How is it produced or grown? How do different cultures use the food?) and the purpose of each task. Pose questions that encourage children to articulate what they are doing

■ **A positive relationship with food**

Learning about food and nutrition from an early age also helps children to develop a positive connection with foods they may not otherwise be exposed to. The more familiar children are with ingredients and the more involved they feel in the

process, the more likely they are to eat the food at the end.

Getting children in cooking

There are various ways of involving children in cooking at nursery. Try combining a few basic activities that children can complete independently or with a minimum of adult involvement.

These could include:

Menu planning

Start a group discussion about healthy foods and unhealthy choices. Using the Eatwell Plate (for a link, go to www.nmt-magazine.co.uk), point out the different food groups that make up a healthy balanced diet. Use the different sections to design a simple but well balanced meal (either breakfast, lunch or dinner), then ask the children to help write a shopping list for that meal.

Food shopping

Once you've written a list, take the children food shopping to pick up some basic provisions from a local farm, supermarket or market. Spend time looking at colourful fruits and vegetables, letting them experience the different textures, flavours, colours and smells. Increasing

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familiarity with foods helps increase a child's willingness to try them - and is a useful way to address fussy eating.

Prepping

Under your supervision, children will love to help prepare a meal. Don't plan an elaborate project - five to 10 minutes is enough for younger children so ensure the activity is simple and age-appropriate. Prep most of the food beforehand and give the children plenty of time to explore all the ingredients and the equipment before you start.

Suitable activities

For two-year-olds, try activities such as:

- washing or drying fruits and vegetables
- tearing lettuce or spinach leaves for a salad
- breaking bread into pieces
- sprinkling grated cheese on top of cooked foods
- adding sprinkles or other toppings to cakes
- helping you read a cookbook by turning the pages
- carrying unbreakable items to the table.

Three-year-olds could try:

- kneading dough
- pouring measured liquids
- mixing dry and wet ingredients together
- buttering a slice of bread
- spreading icing on fairy cakes or biscuits
- crushing biscuits in a plastic bag with a rolling pin
- serving foods
- putting food waste in the bin after cooking.

Four to five-year-olds can:

- set the table
- squeeze the juice from oranges, lemons and limes

Rainbow pasta salad

Ingredients per child

- A handful of cooked wholemeal and tricolore pasta (or chickpea / standard gluten-free pasta to accommodate a gluten allergy)
- A small handful of green vegetables, eg chopped broccoli or cooked frozen peas
- A small handful of yellow vegetables, eg finely chopped yellow peppers or canned sweetcorn
- A small handful of red vegetables, eg finely chopped red onion, red pepper or cherry tomatoes quarters
- 1 heaped tsp of basil pesto
- A sprinkle of grated cheese (or a dairy-free equivalent for allergic children)
- A few pieces of chopped pre-cooked chicken breast slices



Instructions

1. Put the pasta and peas in individual mixing bowls.
2. Finely chop the vegetables small enough to eliminate the risk of choking and grate the cheese. Put these in serving bowls.
3. Let the children rinse the vegetables and talk about why it's important to do so; naming each item as you go.
4. Encourage them to add each vegetable to their pasta bowls and mix well. Highlight the rainbow of colours the vegetables provide and explain that eating such bright and colourful food is very good for you.
5. Allow children to stir in the basil pesto, chicken pieces and cheese and mix well until everything is evenly combined.
6. Encourage them to smell and taste the end result and give their feedback. Point out the mix of different food groups combined in the dish. Provide praise and stickers for those who are happy to taste the food they have made.
7. Tip any remaining pasta into named containers for children to take home.

Suitable for children from 2 years old.

- cut soft fruit or vegetables with a plastic or blunt knife
- mash potato with a potato masher or bananas with the back of a fork
- crush garlic in a garlic press
- measure dry ingredients
- scrub vegetables
- roll out dough
- cut out shapes using cookie cutters
- crack and whisk eggs
- use a sieve
- clear the table after a meal.

Promote good hygiene by putting newspaper on the floor, washing hands before and after food preparation and providing aprons for all.

Suitable recipes

It is important to choose something developmentally appropriate for each age group – anything too involved will quickly lose the children's interest. As they get older, they can concentrate for longer and you can move on to more complicated dishes.

Try recipes that connect with their

particular interests or nursery projects like colours, the seasons or different cultures. It's a good idea to incorporate a mixture of ingredients that children are likely to eat at home plus some more unusual ones that will broaden their horizons.

Once you have decided on a recipe, prepare a simple recipe chart showing illustrations for each step. This helps children to follow the process and can also be given as a handout to parents so they can try it out at home. And be sure to check you have the necessary equipment and that there is adequate supervision. ■

- Sarah West is the in-house nutritionist for nursery catering provider Zebedees, who provide nutritionally balanced meals to nurseries across the South of England

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