

# Cooking in the Classroom

## By Marcy Hemminger

As teachers, we often think that it would be “fun” to cook with our children, especially at certain times of the year or with special themes. But often, it seems too much of a hassle to get everything put together and we end up doing most of the cooking while the children watch or skipping it all together. Some teachers feel that the children are not ready to cook, perhaps lacking the skills or interest in making various foods. Others feel that it is like “free play” and needs to be justified to parents and administrators in order to engage in cooking on a regular basis. But others do realize the value that cooking offers children, but only feel that they can offer it at limited times. To this latter group I encourage you to keep on! Cooking is a fantastic way to pull together many skills and cognitive concepts. It can promote higher level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Since we want our children to be able to function independently as they grow, what better way to develop and foster that independence than through cooking?

To justify incorporating cooking to ourselves as well as our parents and administrators, here are some of the great benefits cooking offers our children:

- **Building math skills**
  - Numeric properties such as counting, ordinal numbers, more/less, sequencing, etc.
  - Fractions
  - Measurement
  - Probability
  - Geometry
  - Problem solving strategies
  - Sorting and classifying
- **Promoting cultures and social studies**
  - Cultural recipes
  - Community awareness
  - Tracking food origins
  - Recreating family experiences
- **Providing opportunities for developing and enhancing language skills**
  - “Reading” recipes
  - Vocabulary development
  - Oral expression
  - Written expression
- **Creating opportunities for science exploration**
  - Use of senses
  - Making predictions
  - Noting physical or chemical changes
  - Identifying food groups
  - Learning about living and growing things
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- **Addresses learning styles**

- Inter-personal
- Intra-personal
- Spatial
- Mathematical
- Verbal-linguistic
- Naturalist
- Kinesthetic

- **It's functional!**

- Following directions
- Life skills
- Motor skills
- Cleaning up
- Working together

How do we make cooking a consistent part of our classroom? We can implement cooking in two ways:

1. It can be promoted through structured lessons, either as a whole group or with small group instruction. By connecting with the literature selection(s) we are using or in line with our monthly/weekly themes, we have a great outlet for tying in cooking. Imagine how fun to make thunder cake after a dramatic reading of the story by Patricia Polacca , or creating a snack that looks like a rocket using bananas and cheese during a space unit, or even practicing cutting and measuring ingredients for soup to develop motor and math skills. These teacher guided activities provide opportunities for everyone to watch and experience cooking by associating these new concepts and skills with prior knowledge.
2. Cooking can also be promoted through the use of centers. Whether the objective is as an “Exploration Center” in order to view, manipulate and investigate foods, tables for making or assembling daily snack, or as a free choice area where children can select to make and play with various foods, centers provide an excellent outlet for children to experiment and interact with cooking as well as chances of developing their motor skills in creating snacks and meals. Centers can be designed for independent exploration and/or guided activities; the recipes and developmental levels of the children can determine which is chosen on any particular day.

To begin adding cooking in your classroom, start by creating a space for the children to work safely. Use real cooking utensils such as pots, pans, knives, spatulas, etc. The children will be much more careful and acquire better skills if they know that they must be careful because they are not using “toys”. Make sure to have either a sink or a basin with soapy water nearby to encourage frequent hand/utensil washing. Just as you should be using real, life-sized cooking utensils, it is recommended that you use child-sized serving pieces. It will be much easier for children to handle small plates, cups and bowls for pouring, serving and eating. Have tables and chairs nearby also to create that “homey” atmosphere and to provide opportunities for making and eating the foods.

For storing and displaying items in your cooking area, store “danger” items up and away so that they are not utilized without supervision. Use pictures and labels so that children can get and return used items. Try, when you can, to group tools by function such as serving tools, chopping tools, mixing tools, etc. This provides the children with an additional way to determine the use of the tools and utensils. Make the cooking area attractive so that the children want to come and work here. Decorate with table cloths or placemats, curtains, pictures/posters of food, etc. This helps to recreate the family environment and adds authenticity to the area.

Before cooking lessons or time for cooking center exploration, review some kitchen safety rules to remind the children of how to behave in this area and with these tools. Have regular discussions about:

- Fire safety
- Heat safety
- Oven safety
- Knife safety
- Choking
- Allergies
- Proper hand and food washing

Use a non-skid material such as Dycem® to help prevent slippage and spills and to allow the children to experience success. When possible, use non-breakable tools and materials to reduce accidents and the stress they cause. Finally, become aware of developmentally appropriate skills. Threes and fours are able to do many of the same things, but threes can engage in pouring, measuring and cutting activities, but should avoid cutting with knives or peeling with vegetable peelers.

Some final tips:

- Create action cards that show the children what they need to do using pictures and words to convey meaning. For example, if they are to collect two graham crackers, four apples slices and to pour their own juice for today's snack, draw a picture of a graham cracker with the number 2 underneath + a picture of an apple slice and the number 4 + a picture of a pitcher pouring juice in a cup. This helps children function independently successfully.
- Use separate trays, placemats or tables to distinguish between preparing and eating places.
- Involve your families! Let them help with food donations, recipes, cultural input, and food preparation either in or out of the classroom.
- Remember to let the children have fun! There are going to be messes made, accidents, spills, and the food won't look like the pictures, but it isn't about making food for you, it's about letting them make food for themselves. The more opportunities children have for doing it all independently, or with minimal assistance, the more likely they are to grasp and keep the skills forever.

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### Resources:

Colker, Laura J. "the Cooking book". NAEYC, 2005.

The Editors of Klutz. "Kids Cooking A Very Slightly Messy Manual" Scholastic, Inc., 1987.