

Involving Kids in the Kitchen: Topic of the Month

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This Topic of the Month was written with University of Minnesota Public Health Nutrition (MPH) graduate student Gabriela Meraz-Fishbein.

Involving kids in the kitchen and encouraging them to participate in age-appropriate tasks will help develop adventurous eaters, build confidence, and is a great way to begin conversations about healthy eating. When kids help prepare meals, they are more likely to develop a positive relationship with food. Read this month's topic to explore ways to support families in the kitchen.



Importance

For families in WIC, having kids help with meal preparation is a great way to use WIC foods, eat healthy meals, and support children's growth and development. Trying new foods is a learning process, and every child is different. Parents can work with their children in the kitchen to help them get used to new foods. Spending time together also helps build strong relationships, fosters good communication, and promotes understanding. Parents are their child's first and most important teachers!

Making and eating balanced meals with WIC foods gives children the nutrients and energy they need to grow, play, and learn. The [Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters \(PDF\)](#) can help parents as they face challenges with new foods. Read some of the tips below for more ideas to share with parents and caregivers.

Tips for families

- Involve kids in picking out produce when you shop.
- Give kids portions that fit their age.
- Introduce one new food at a time.
- Ask kids to choose: “Would you like to try broccoli or cauliflower?”
- Serve the same foods to the whole family and show your child how you enjoy a variety of foods.
- Keep offering new foods, even if kids don’t like them at first—trying new foods takes time!
- Put away electronics during meals and enjoy family time together.

Share nutrition education cards with participants: [Feed with Confidence \(PDF\)](#), [A Child's Appetite \(PDF\)](#), and [Enjoy Family Meals \(PDF\)](#).

Ideas for age-appropriate kitchen tasks

When cooking with children who are under the age of 5, make sure to give them simple, safe, and interactive tasks. Parents can determine what tasks their child is ready for. Always encourage hand washing before starting any cooking task.

- **Toddlers** (2-3 years old): Activities for this age group vary on skill level and focus on fine motor skills and following simple directions.
 - Wash fruits and vegetables.
 - Stir ingredients in a bowl with a spoon or their hands.
 - Tear lettuce leaves or greens.
 - Carry unbreakable items to the table, different counters, etc.
- **Preschoolers** (3-5 years old):
 - Add premeasured ingredients to recipes.
 - Mash ingredients (beans, banana, hard-boiled eggs, etc.).
 - Pour liquids.
 - Arrange food on a plate.
 - Cut soft foods.
 - Help set the table.

Getting the child involved

When parents are trying a new recipe with their child, encourage them to make a plan. This includes finding a recipe, shopping for the ingredients, laying everything out at home, and preparing the dish. Picture how this will work using the example recipe: [Fruit Parfait](#).

Shopping:

Once parents have decided on a recipe, they can make a list and head to the store. For the example recipe here, the family can use their WIC food benefits to choose fruit, plain yogurt, and the cereal that they want to use on top.

Preparation:

Once the family is home with all their ingredients, it is time to assemble the parfait.

1. Place $\frac{1}{4}$ of a diced fruit at the bottom of a cup.
2. Cover fruit with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup yogurt.
3. Top with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cereal.

Preparation tip: Encourage families to wash fruits and vegetables before eating or cooking. This helps remove dirt, insects, and bacteria that could cause foodborne illness. For longer storage, remind families to dry produce thoroughly after washing.

Involve the child:

- Depending on age, kids can help construct their parfaits and scoop yogurt into their cups.
 - Have children measure out cereal with measuring cups.
 - Let the child choose the type of fruit they want.
 - Allow the child to help add their own layers of fresh fruit and cereal.

Recipe Tips: Swap out different fruits to change this recipe! For those with gluten sensitivity, choose a gluten-free cereal, or a wheat-free cereal for those with a wheat allergy.

Ideas to make food fun

1. Collaborate with the child in making a snack box (put this in the fridge for later use).
 - Choose WIC foods to create this snack box.
 - Examples of food options include whole grain cereal, diced cheese, sliced strawberries, blueberries, and whole wheat bread with peanut butter in small bite pieces.
 - Create this snack box or plate with a child so they are excited to eat healthy foods.
 - Tell a story while making a snack.

2. Play with color.
 - Use WIC fruits and vegetables to create a “rainbow” with the child.
 - Ask the child to identify colors in different foods.
3. Shapes.
 - Use cookie cutters to cut sandwiches, fruit, tortillas, and other foods into fun shapes.
 - Make faces with different shapes of foods (bowl of oatmeal with blueberries as eyes, apple slice as mouth).
4. Explore with the five senses.
 - Encourage the child to use all their senses to explore food. What do they see, smell, feel, hear, and taste?

Conversation starters

Use these questions to spark questions and engage kids with the food they are eating. Cooking is a great time to connect!

- **Textures/smells:** How does this food feel in your hands? What does it smell like before we cook it? How will it smell after we cook it?
- **Colors/shapes:** What color are these fruits and vegetables? What’s another food that is the same shape as a triangle/square/circle?
- **Taste:** Do you think this will taste sweet, salty, or sour? What could we add to this to make it yummier?
- **Counting/sorting:** Can you help me count how many grapes (other items) are in this bowl? How many plates (utensils, etc.) do we need to take out for everyone to have one?
- **Family connection:** Who in our family likes this food the most? Who else would you want to share this food with?
- **Trying new foods:** What’s one thing you are excited to taste? What foods do you always enjoy?
- **Healthy habits:** Why do you think fruits and veggies help our bodies?
- **Food supply:** Where does milk come from? Where do veggies come from? Can you guess where they might grow?
- **Cooking roles:** What job do you want to help me with today (stirring, pouring, sorting, measuring)?

Safety in the kitchen

When cooking with children, it’s very important to keep food safety in mind. Parents can teach kids good kitchen habits by showing them how to wash their hands properly, reminding them not to touch or taste raw foods like meat or eggs, and keeping raw foods away from foods that


are ready to eat. It also helps to use age-appropriate utensils by avoiding sharp tools like knives, graters, or peelers and choosing kid-safe alternatives when possible.

Adults play an important role in keeping cooking safe. This means storing food properly, making sure food is cooked to the right temperature, and guiding kids in using safe tools. Talking about food safety while cooking helps keep everyone healthy!

Food safety resources

- [Food Safety - Education Materials and Information](#)
- [Food Safety in Your Kitchen](#)
- [Cook to a Safe Minimum Internal Temperature](#)
- [FoodKeeper App](#)

Recipe resources

- [Recipes](#)- search through the list of MN WIC recipes available to families on the website and the Minnesota WIC app.
-  **LOOK** for this handprint in the recipes; these are areas where **children can help**.
- [Explore with Confidence](#)- A step-by-step guide to using the Health eKitchen from wichealth.org.
- [Affordable Flavors Meal Plan and Cook Book](#)- A free cost-saving meal plan for participants.
- [MyPlate Kitchen](#) (MyPlate, USDA)

Reference- complete listing of hyperlinks:

[Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters](#)

(<https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/healthy-tips-for-picky-eaters-english.pdf>)

[Feed with Confidence](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/nutrition/english/childconfidence.pdf>)

[A Child's Appetite](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/nutrition/english/childappetite.pdf>)

[Enjoy Family Meals](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/nutrition/english/genfamilymeals.pdf>)

[Fruit Parfait](#) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/recipes/cereals.html#fruit>)

[Food Safety - Education Materials and Information](#)

(<https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/food-safety-education-materials-and-information-resources>)

INVOLVING KIDS IN THE KITCHEN: TOPIC OF THE MONTH

Food Safety in Your Kitchen (<https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/food-safety-your-kitchen>)

Cook to a Safe Minimum Internal Temperature (<https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-internal-temperatures>)

FoodKeeper App (<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app>)

Recipes (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/recipes/index.html>)

Explore with Confidence

(<https://www.wichealth.org/Member/Resource?id=5113&languageId=1>)

wichealth.org (<https://www.wichealth.org/>)

Affordable Flavors Meal Plan and Cook Book (<https://kidseatincolor.com/minnesota-department-of-health-kids-eat-in-color/>)

MyPlate Kitchen (<https://www.myplate.gov/myplate-kitchen>)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL, MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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