

Kids Cooking
So Hot It's Cool
By Erin Mantz

Five-year-old Ethan can run a blender like nobody's business (supervised by Mom, of course). Eleven-year-old Madeline turns out bruschetta tasty enough to be served at top Italian restaurants. Thirteen-year-old Courtney conjures up images of an authentic junior chef as she cooks calzones for a family dinner. Kids are cooking in kitchens all across America. The trend is heating up here as well, and cooking is one of the hottest hobbies around. This means extraordinary opportunities for kids and big business for schools, companies and chefs offering cooking classes, camps and parties. Best of all, many parents are recognizing all the great benefits cooking can offer kids, beyond great food.

At Bethesda's L'Academie de Cuisine, 5- and 6-year-olds are sauntering out of a "Parent-Munchkin" Italian Feast class covered in ingredients from their freshly baked cheesy garlic bread. Petite chefs as young as 7 are happily baking goodies for a holiday cookie jar, and teens are sharpening their knife skills and digging into Thai cuisine. L'Academie manager Clarice Dionot has seen cooking's popularity rise over the last few years. Many of their classes have waiting lists, and some students return for summer camp sessions. Dionot started as a camper here herself and understands why cooking is captivating parents and kids alike. "The kitchen is the heart of the house. When kids join in, cooking dinner doesn't become such a chore."

Kids can benefit from cooking in countless ways: developing math and science skills, building self-esteem, exercising creativity and much more. Three big benefits parents tout involve communication, healthy eating and creativity.

Making and Awakening Happy Childhood Memories

Do you remember being a kid and hanging out in the kitchen with your mom? DC mom Lisa Jobe fondly remembers learning to cook as a sixth grader in public school

home economics and putting those skills to use at home with her family. Those early experiences fostered a love of cooking and led her to L'Academie for an adult cooking class years ago. Later, Jobe brought daughter Courtney to a parent-child cooking class, a good chance to bond and connect on a Saturday. Both had a blast. Today, 13-year-old Courtney continues the cooking tradition. With four years of cooking classes, three seasons of camp and one cooking birthday party under her belt, Courtney proudly claims cooking as a hobby. Younger sister Keely balances an after-school cooking class with sports and other activities and encourages friends to join her. Jobe couldn't be happier. "A love of cooking is something they'll carry through for the rest of their lives. It's nice to have your kids find that."

Healthy Eating Habits for Life

With rising obesity rates, the popularity of fast food and a rush-rush society, why are kids today so interested in cooking? Many cooking teachers, parents and kids are quick to mention the Food Network as playing a big role in bringing cooking off the back burner, increasing its awareness – and doing it well. Laura Marshall of Alexandria recalls how her now 11-year-old daughter Madeline would watch the Food Network and say she wanted to chop and mix like the chefs do. At 8, Madeline started cooking classes and then camp at Northern Virginia's "Flavors for Kids." Today, the sixth-grader makes herself energy bars to snack on between piano and chorus. She credits cooking for helping her in science and math, being a healthier eater and finding friends with common interests. Marshall raves about Flavors owner and teacher Lanette Doran, who uses cooking to help kids build healthy habits and make healthy choices for life.

Doran's "Flavors for Kids" classes and camps captivate kids through a hands-on approach and an emphasis on the senses that engage them. "We talk about how slippery kiwi feels, the colors of fruits and vegetables, and we try to think about and describe how each food tastes. I tell kids, 'Food can change the way you feel,'" says Doran. Her philosophy is to expose kids to new foods, encourage food exploration and develop a lifelong love of new things. She tells her students: "You may not like everything you try, but try everything you make." And with every session, she sees how kids benefit from

cooking. They learn how to develop healthy habits, how to experience new things, work together, use measurement skills for math and art skills for food display. Her kids cooking program, airing on Fairfax Cable, clearly shows how much fun kids are having with all these discoveries. Her advice for getting kids started in the kitchen?

- Start with one thing, and let them do a good job with that first.
- Get them interested in the tools. For example, ask what a garlic press does and go from there.
- Good jobs for kids to try (with an adult's help and depending on the child's age) include mincing herbs, measuring liquid and making smoothies.

Cooking To Foster Creativity and Communication

Parents Jimmy and Andrea Zeilinger wanted to create an activity that allowed a caring adult and child to create shared memories together while cooking. Believing the kitchen is a great place for conversation, they created Crafty Cooking Kits to do just that. From “Pretzel Shop” to “Inside Out S’mores,” their kits encourage kids to use their imaginations to design and decorate treats. For example, the “Brownie Treats” kit can be turned into a canvas to paint pictures using the frosting and colored gels that come with the mix. For parents, the kits offer convenience – ideas, inspiration and ingredients, all in one place. The kits are educational, too, including games and puzzles that teach kids the history of the treat they are making. They even offer activities adults and children can do while the treats bake. After the goodies are done, kids can take a digital photo of their masterpiece and upload it into the “fridge” on the Crafty Cooking Kits website at www.craftycookingkits.com. Their work is displayed, and they can peek at treats created by kids across the country.

With all this activity in the kitchen, we wonder – why *does* cooking captivate kids? Maybe it's the process that intrigues them. Maybe it's the chance to create things. It could be the permission to get messy or that feeling of pride and accomplishment when the dish is done. They might just love the food. Or, in the words of my 5-year-old son Max, a devoted fan of the Food Network's “Emeril” cooking show, maybe it's simply that “Cooking is cool!”

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SIDEBARS

Find It Online: Great Recipe and Cooking Web Sites for Kids

- Spatulatta!: <http://spatulatta.com/whatsnew.html>. Explore this James Beard Foundation 2006 Award-Winning site and discover an online recipe box organized around fun themes, seasons and holidays, online videos demonstrating basic skills, like shredding cheese and using a microwave, “artist in the kitchen” food decorating and craft projects, pictures of measurements and more.
- Father’s World: www.fathersworld.com/recipes/dadscookin. Determine the best kitchen tools for kids; find fun and easy recipes.
- USDA Healthy Meals Resource System: <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov>. Click on “Recipes and Menu Planning.” Search for recipes by ingredient, see tips and techniques for cooking with school age children.
- Fairfax County Public Schools “Kids Cooking” site: www.fcps.k12.va.us/fs/food/kids_cooking. See kitchen safety tips, find easy-to-make snacks, and tie the food pyramid into recipe choices.
- The Food Network: www.foodnetwork.com. Find a special kids section featuring seasonal recipes, demos and detailed techniques on everything from forming pizza to making sushi.

Fall

The Perfect Time to Get Your Family Cooking

- Extend that apple picking outing into the kitchen. Return from the orchard, and go online with your kids to search for recipes featuring apples.

- Go online to www.allyoucaneatbaking.com for Crafty Cooking Kits. These are great activities for kids to do with parents, grandparents, friends or babysitters
- Cook Thanksgiving as a family!* Kids can...
 - Wash their hands!
 - Gather cooking pans and utensils and bring food from the refrigerator to the counter.
 - Wash vegetables for a side dish or salad.
 - Help measure ingredients.
 - Insert the food thermometer into the turkey, with your help (Hold on to the big pan and turkey!). Wash hands again.
 - Explain the entrees and side dishes to guests.
 - Help clear the table and put leftovers away.
 - Enjoy eating leftovers the next day.

*Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Cooking Turkey Is A Family Affair,” November 2002.

Local Flavor

A Taste of Kids’ Cooking Opportunities Around Town

- Enroll your child in a cooking class. Find a class based on age, food theme, location and more in *The Washington Post’s* comprehensive Cooking Class Listings (September 6, 2006 issue) at www.thewashingtonpost.com. Or ask friends about the cooking teachers their kids like.
- Expose your preschoolers to a cooking enrichment class, now offered at many area preschools.
- Research kids’ cooking camps for next summer, and note registration deadlines.
- Watch for kids’ cooking events and workshops at select local restaurants, grocery stores, food festivals and upscale kitchen stores (i.e. Sur La Table).
- Plan a cooking birthday party for your little chef.
- Have him help you prepare dinner tonight – give him an age-appropriate job.

Playing It Safe In The Kitchen

Robin Wilcox, director of programs for Safe Kids Worldwide, shares these important tips to keep kids safe while cooking and helping in the kitchen:

- Adults need to practice “active supervision.” This means keeping your eyes on your child and not leaving him unattended.
- Know what your child is capable of doing – physically and with regard to making decisions.
- Use back burners, and always turn handles in on pots on front burners.
- Some examples of good tasks for 5- and 6-year-olds include rinsing food, using cookie cutters, or smashing dough.
- Kids 8 and older can use dull knives.
- Never let a child under 10 take something out of the microwave. The vast majority – 95 percent – of microwave burns among children are scald burns and are typically caused by spilling hot liquids or food.
- Kids 10 and older can use some small appliances with adult supervision.
- Kids 12 and over may use a paring knife, flip hamburgers or pancakes and put a cookie sheet into the oven – with adult supervision.
- Kids 14 and over may learn how to take a hot tray out of the oven using potholders.