

## Cooking Skills

Cooking is an essential life skill. By teaching children how to cook at a young age, you are supporting them in becoming more independent as they get older. Cooking with children is a great way to encourage them to get excited about a variety of foods, especially fruits and vegetables. When children are involved in the cooking process, they're more likely to try new foods and eat a wider variety.

Cooking also involves a range of motor skills, including chopping, stirring, and measuring. By learning these different tasks, children develop their hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. Cooking also provides an opportunity for children to practise counting and measuring, to learn about science and about using cooking equipment and techniques too.

When children are involved in meal preparation, they feel a sense of achievement and pride in their creations. This can help to build their confidence in their own abilities and encourage them to take on new challenges.



**Have a think about the last time you learnt a new skill; what was it that helped you learn this? How did you feel? What kept you motivated to keep going, even when it got difficult? How many times did you practice before the new skill became automatic? If you were to do it again, is there anything you would do differently?**

### Things to consider when encouraging cooking skills:

- ✔ **Break the tasks down:** into smaller chunks to make them more manageable. To start with, your child will not be able to cook a whole meal on their first attempt, so it's important to break the task down and slowly increase how much you expect them to do. For example, if making a sandwich, they could get all of the ingredients out ready, you can do the chopping of fillings and your child can add everything to the sandwich. Over time, you can give them more responsibility and duties
- ✔ **Time:** it is important to choose the right time of day to practise cooking skills. Ensure that there is plenty of time to cook, with no need to rush (i.e. going out somewhere or the family feeling very hungry)
- ✔ **Mood:** if your child is tired or hungry they are less likely to engage. Be mindful of this
- ✔ **Distractions:** cooking is something that requires concentration and focus, i.e. reading recipes, timing and using utensils. Try to reduce the number of distractions in the kitchen when cooking with your child (i.e. the television, too many people, and too many objects on the worktop)



- ✔ **Trust:** allow your child to give something a go for themselves (where it is safe to do so) and only intervene when they start to become distressed or need adult support. Try not to rush to fix everything so quickly. For example, allow them to weigh out an ingredient by themselves or pour a liquid into a container. If the child pours too much, this can be cleared up and your child will be able to learn from their mistake
- ✔ **Stay calm** and try not to add more pressure. Accept that there may be mess and your child may make an error, but that's okay

## Setting the 'just right' challenge with your child

It is important to enable your child to gain a sense of achievement when learning a new skill. The 'just right' challenge ensures that you are encouraging your child to develop their skills and independence, whilst ensuring that the goal they are working towards is realistic. The sense of achievement which they experience acts as a great motivator to encourage your child to keep working towards mastering these skills.



### Things to consider:

- How much of the task do you/they expect to complete by themselves?
- How difficult is it to make the particular meal or snack planned?
- Are they confident using all the utensils required?
- What support will you provide?

## What can you do to support your child with developing cooking skills?

- ✔ Encourage your child to monitor their own progress by asking questions like "How did that go?" or "What could make that better?"
- ✔ Some children may need direct, simple prompts when doing the cooking task, such as "stir slowly" or "look what you're doing" or "use the spoon to scoop"
- ✔ You can use actions alongside prompts, such as motioning an action required for a rolling pin if your child finds it helpful to see what it is they should be doing
- ✔ Some children find it helpful to have 'hands on' help to experience the action required. For example, hold your hand over or under theirs as they spread butter
- ✔ Give lots of praise to reward effort, identifying clearly what action they have done which you are proud of



## Getting started- easy meals and snacks

- ✔ **Toast** – what could be simpler than putting some bread in the toaster? This easy task gives children the opportunity to practise a variety of skills, including timing, spreading and cutting
- ✔ **Cake from a mix** – these come with easy to follow directions with minimal ingredients. Often all you need to do is add milk or egg, so it's the perfect opportunity to allow your child to take the lead
- ✔ **Noodles or pasta** – another simple meal, but the opportunity to practise different skills. Pop some water on the stove and heat the noodles/pasta through. This meal is also easy to upgrade (increase the difficulty); they can be served plain, with sauce (homemade or shop bought) or with add-ins such as meat or veggies
- ✔ **Pancakes and waffles** – are a great staple that work on many skills, using limited ingredients. You can use a ready made mix to grade down the activity or use a homemade pancake recipe to offer more opportunities for measurement and pouring
- ✔ **Sandwich preparation** – sandwiches are a great basic item that involves problem solving, sequencing, following directions, and fine motor skills. This is a safe option for children to make on their own, as they do not have to use heat, and can spread items with the back of a spoon instead of a knife for added safety
- ✔ **Smoothies** – this is a great way to add different fruits as nutrition but also a way to practise slicing, chopping different textures, pouring liquid, and managing equipment (a blender)

## Helpful resources

- ✔ Eat Well – NHS: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/)
- ✔ BBC Good Food Recipes for Kids:  
[www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/collection/kids-cooking-recipes](http://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/collection/kids-cooking-recipes)
- ✔ Tesco Easy Recipe for Kids:  
[realfood.tesco.com/recipes/collections/easy-recipes-for-kids.html](http://realfood.tesco.com/recipes/collections/easy-recipes-for-kids.html)
- ✔ The Eat Happy Project: [www.eathappyproject.com/parents/](http://www.eathappyproject.com/parents/)
- ✔ Cooking with Children YouTube Channel – Happy Eat Project:  
[www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Oqyis8a\\_Yee5GOuOcS0zg](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Oqyis8a_Yee5GOuOcS0zg)

## Contact us

✔ **Children's Community Therapies**  
Occupational Therapy  
Chelsley Wood Primary Care Centre  
16 Crabtree Drive, Chelsley Wood  
Birmingham, B37 5BU

✔ 0121 722 8010  
✔ [paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net](mailto:paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net)  
✔ [childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk](http://childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk)