

Cooking with attitude: How to help promote positive lifelong skills in the kitchen

Mary Thompson does not like to be in the kitchen. It's time consuming. It's messy. It's boring. She views cooking for herself, her sons, and her mother as just one more chore in an always busy day. While she enjoys eating, her kitchen skills are severely lacking, due in part to her disdain for cooking.

"We often go to Friendly's®, or a pizza place," she says. It's just easier to eat out because there are other, more fun things, to do. Plus, her live-in mother, Nana, loves Friendly's Fishamajig® sandwiches. Nana is a big part of their lives, and going out to eat provides a way for everyone to spend time together.



Many adults have similar feelings toward cooking. With the hectic pace of modern life, most families rely on fast food or other processed options not only for satisfying hunger but also for spending quality time with loved ones.

Often, negative feelings toward cooking stem from early memories of cooking. "My father never used spices," says Mary, who remembers the bland boiled meals he often prepared. Many recall not being taught to cook or

being raised in an environment filled with limited ingredients, low motivation, or a lack of appreciation for healthy quality foods. Long into adulthood, feelings of dislike and failure persist. These negative feelings can affect later relationships with food, from a lack of confidence in the ability to follow a recipe to low interest in teaching one's own children, or one's students, how to cook.

Although cooking is Mary's most dreaded activity in the home, her sons look to her as an example. It is almost three decades later and Mary still blames herself and struggles with guilt over her children's weight issues: "I hated to cook and I feel responsible." It is sad to say, but she is probably right. Parents play a large part in attitude and aptitude development of their children—in the kitchen and in life.



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Perhaps it is now time for educators to take a larger part in the attitude adjustment process.

Spreading an “I hate to cook” attitude

The research suggests that the early years lay the foundation for future attitudes toward eating. Food insecurities have been linked to many negative outcomes on childhood development and growth (Cook and Frank 2008) and overall life quality (Casey, et al. 2005). Young children develop feelings about food early on and a palate for what they like and dislike. Natural positive attitudes toward food and cooking may just as easily be smothered and replaced with disinterest or lack of motivation if parents do not nurture it. As a result, young

children may end up similar to Mary’s sons—patterned to unhealthy food choices, indifferent to food preparation, and at higher risk for nutrition-related health issues.

Even so, children often approach cooking with curiosity, enthusiasm, and an eagerness to get involved. They may be too young to use a butcher knife, turn on the stove, and work unsupervised, yet if they have proper guidance, there are many ways they can actively contribute to food choice and preparation.

At the same time, many educators and parents are stuck with their negative cooking mindset, avoid the kitchen as a positive learning environment, or do not approach opportunities to cook the same way as children do. This is a problem because children

internalize their educators’ and parents’ enthusiasm in a social setting or lack thereof (Bandura 1986). Many cooking-hating individuals like Mary may be unaware that just a lack of interest in cooking can negatively impact a child’s attitude toward food.

Perhaps more detrimental, some adults often engage in shortcuts (such as takeout meals at home or pre-prepared snacks at school) rather than choosing to prepare homemade meals (Mentzer Morrison, et. al. 2010; Stewart, et al. 2004). This promotes habits of convenience, rather than putting in the work to consume nutritious fare. Unconscious modeling of fast food, takeout, and pre-prepared food as the answer to most meals denies the benefits of wholesome foods. It teaches children that fast and easy is better than thoughtful focus on nutrition. It also fails to help children develop intrinsic interest in cooking as a useful and valuable lifelong practice.

Moreover, limited exposure to cooking environments may lead to difficult relationships to food later in life. Research shows something as simple as preparing breakfast can have positive cognitive and health benefits (Basch 2010). So the cycle continues: a cooking-hating environment, lack of motivation, and an indifferent or negative adult attitude combine to create another “I hate to cook” individual.

Moving toward an “I like to cook” attitude

How can we change the negative to the positive? Here are some suggestions.

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1. Acknowledge our feelings toward cooking. The first step is to acknowledge the emotional baggage we each may carry when we come to the kitchen, either from early experiences (or lack thereof) or past experiences when cooking did not turn out as we had planned. This is not to say summoning up joy for cooking is easy (Pollan 2009) and that we can suddenly get over feelings of indifference or failure. However, just identifying any negative feelings related to cooking and reflecting on their source can provide a beginning basis for moving forward and starting with a fresh attitude. All educators can benefit from this reflection.

2. Redefine ourselves as competent cooks. This step is about realizing we have enough food choice knowledge and decision-making skills to create a positive experience for children in the classroom. It's not about making complicated recipes with a multitude of ingredients and procedures or using difficult-to-handle food options or equipment.

Instead, it's about using the Internet and exploring cooking shows on television to find a handful of simple, time-effective recipes that can be practiced with children. It's about exploring food choices, accepting that failures are a part of life, and realizing that with practice comes success—all important lessons for children in the kitchen.

Educators and parents who are quick to say, "I am so bad in the kitchen" and "I hate cooking" are the same ones who routinely opt out of cooking experiences and succeed at complicated decision making and problem solving.

Redefining ourselves as cooks means recognizing that we can use the same decision-making and problem-solving processing in cooking-related activities as we use in other aspects of life, and that we can share these skills with children.

3. Carefully examine our current cooking practice. This step is about taking the time to critically look at how negative feelings toward cooking may be influencing what—and how—we teach our children about cooking.

Reflect on the following:

- Have I ever allowed children to perform simple, age-appropriate tasks related to food preparation?
- Do I have any recipes or cooking activities that could be engaging and inspiring to children?
- Do I seek out opportunities to deepen the culinary understanding of myself as well my children?
- Do I model the relevance and importance of best food practices to everyday life for children?

Finding the answers may require a bit of research. Helpful information is available in articles and websites such as the following:

- California Department of Education (www.cde.ca.gov/Ls/nu/he/cookwithkids.asp),
- Nemours: A Children's Health System (kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/kids_cook.html#)
- Rachel Ray's Yum-O (www.yum-o.org/), and
- The Purple Carrot (www.thepurplecarrot.com).

In addition, Internet searches for "kid friendly recipes" and "cooking with children" will yield

a multitude of websites with helpful information that can be used to engage children in cooking activities both in the classroom and at home.

We found a great downloadable app called "Grandma's Kitchen." It includes cooking vocabulary, videos, and short skills games. Try the healthy food fridge hunt! See: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/grandmas-kitchen/id602808356?mt=8>. Share the app with parents to bridge a cooking focus between home and school.

It might be a good idea to prepare weekly recipes to send home with students that involve simple steps and ingredients. Johnny could be proud to show his parents his new skill set: "Look what I can make!"

4. Create a new plan for rethinking good food practices at school and at home.

This step is about focusing on ways for bringing a socially positive shared experience to children and their families and for building confident, capable eaters, problem solvers, and informed decision makers. Consider the following guidelines.

View cooking as a process rather than a rigid set of rules. While there are rules to recipes, part of the creativity and fun of cooking is to adjust recipes to the children's taste and ability level. Give children some lettuce to tear for salads instead of chopping with a knife or have them include raisins in the salad if that is a favorite food.

Keep this in mind in the classroom and reiterate to parents that cooking is not just a set of instructions. Instead, the focus is on problem solving, making sense of the activity, and eating. The pro-

cess of progressing through recipe steps, experimenting, and finding ways to include children in hands-on food preparation activities is just as important as the product.

Make cooking at school and at home a participant sport.

Carefully observe children to find ways to continue to spark interest in cooking and the desire to help in the kitchen. When curiosity is aroused, natural engagement and excitement in the usefulness of kitchen skills and the satisfaction of eating will follow.

Cooking should not consist of a lecture-type explanation and child observation. Instead, use simple, hands-on activities and routines that everyone can work on together to introduce and develop important cooking skills. The ultimate goal is for children to devel-

op basic knowledge and techniques, along with the independence and confidence to use and expand on them. Active participation prompts children to realize that cooking is an important everyday activity in which they can contribute to a meal and to their own health.

Use social interaction to capitalize on children's natural tendency to make sense of the steps and processes involved in cooking.

When children follow a picture recipe, measure a half a cup of oatmeal, compare the difference between raw and cooked noodles, and stir the batter, they are experiencing literacy, mathematics, science, and motor skills. Children will use these skills later on to make informed decisions about how they will select and prepare food.

This means focusing on and reinforcing statements and ideas children use. Children may say, "I have **three** apples," "That's about **half** the pancake batter," and "He has **more** carrots." When we hear such statements, we can prompt children to mathematically evaluate these instances (Hachey 2009).

By paying attention to these practices (naming ingredients, reinforcing statements, and assessing learning), we can use daily cooking conversations to engage children in developing reasoning skills. Simple activities like altering favorite recipes, taste-testing novel foods, experimenting with simple food-preparation hardware (such as whisks, thermometers, and cookie cutters), and learning the health benefits of various foods naturally teaches content and process knowledge that is the heart of later cross-content academic thinking.

Focus on play as a way to introduce cooking concepts and methods. Sometimes, playing with your food is OK. Try different themes and explore textures, shape, and color options to make food interesting. Play offers rich occasions for children to be motivated to help prepare food. Intrinsically motivated children often exhibit persistence and creativity in problem solving during play (Hachey 2009).

It's about finding the fun in cooking, even if you are not a fan. Testing new flavors can be rewarding for teachers and children, offering opportunities for authentic exploration and engagement. Engaging parents and children in cooking gatherings will provide opportunities for happiness and rewarding use of the

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kitchen. Your dramatic play area probably already has plastic foods and recycled food containers. Think about adding safe cooking tools, such as whisks and plastic noodle presses, as well as aprons and chef hats.

Make the time to come together in cooking activities in the classroom. Our school schedules are busy, but time spent in cooking activities with your children can provide knowledge and skills that will last a lifetime. Make cooking time classroom sharing time by building in meaningful discussions, sharing, and listening. Enhance cooking activities by asking questions that seek clarification, extend thinking, and connect to past cooking experiences.

Although you may start with cooking experiences that focus on snack time, look to move to sharing meal preparation together, too. Discuss learning from past mistakes and spend time practicing for future successful cooking outcomes. In addition to school engagement, encourage parents to dedicate time to allow children to help with meal preparation.

The 20-minute drive to the local Friendly's can instead be spent with Nana and the rest of the family socially interacting and creating something nutritious for the whole family. Or that monthly class pizza party can benefit from a healthy homemade version instead of the speedy promptness of a local delivery service.

5. Positively change food-related teaching practices.

Give thought to the snacks and meals you plan to develop not just in skill but also in food knowledge. Deliberately build in opportunities for success by try-

ing out simple recipes beforehand, thereby minimizing the potential for hassle and aggravation when doing them with children. Move to meaningful experiences, building skills that children can repeat and use in their everyday lives. Make cooking and food choices a valued part of their home and your classroom.

Moving from snacks to simple meals

For you as a teacher, it may seem at first daunting to jump into cooking activities in the classroom, especially full meal preparation. But you can start small by introducing cooking-like activities, if you haven't already.

Adding plastic utensils, plates, pots, toy food ingredients, and measuring spoons and cups to a water or sand table will encourage children to naturally engage in cooking-related play.

Before children begin to handle any food they will eat, spend a few minutes on basic safety and hygiene. Demonstrate how to wash hands, and post an illustrated reminder next to the activity. Remind children to help with cleanup, as they do after other activities, by washing dishes, putting away leftovers, wiping off surfaces, and discarding trash.

For a tangible cooking-like activity, consider letting snack be a choice during free play time. Children can go to a prepared table and make their own snack by following a menu placemat. For instance, write *8 raisins*, *3 crackers*, and *half a cup of juice*, on a placemat-size piece of poster board. Draw pictures or glue photos of the items on the poster board to illustrate. Cover the

placemat with contact paper or laminate to make it easy to clean and re-usable. Place the placemats on the table along with a bowl of raisins, a bowl of crackers, a child-size pitcher of juice, and cups.

Or try a tasting table where children taste several different types of a food to compare and discuss, such as low-salt pretzels, crackers, bagels, and whole-grain bread. Another option is to try out a new or exotic food, such as avocado, star fruit, or kale chips.

Note: Never force children to eat something. Always focus on being positive, and use gentle encouragement, accepting that children have different tastes and free choice. Children may have to be presented a new food sometimes as many as 15 times before learning to eat it. That is why classroom exposure to new foods can be helpful not only in contributing to a child's health but also in giving parents a hand in getting children to begin trying and liking novel foods (Satter 2008).

Next, you may want to move up to independent cooking activities. These types of activities include simple recipes that children can complete on their own with minimal adult support. They do not include heat, sharp knives, or other equipment that needs constant adult supervision.

Ants on a log

Here's what you need:

- celery
- raisins or other dried fruit such as cranberries or blueberries
- a spread such as peanut or cashew butter, or low-fat cream cheese or vegan cream cheese
- plastic serrated knives
- spoons

1. Break off celery stalks and rinse them thoroughly in water.
2. Use a plastic serrated knife to cut each stalk into halves or thirds.
3. Use a spoon to fill the celery hollow with a spread.
4. Place raisins along the spread. These are the ants on a log.

Variations: Rather than raisins, provide a variety of animal crackers that children can insert in the spread to stand the animals up. Or place two mini pretzels point side down and angle them in the spread to create a butterfly, with or without raisin eyes.

Apple frogs

Here's what you need:

- green apples, cut in wedges
 - green grapes, cut in half
 - carob chips
 - a spread such as peanut or cashew butter, or low-fat cream cheese or vegan cream cheese
 - plastic serrated knives
1. Use a knife to apply a spread to an apple wedge.
 2. Top the wedge with another apple wedge, making a wedge-shaped sandwich.
 3. Use a dab of spread to hold two grapes on the top wedge and a bit more spread to add two carob chips on top of the grapes. The grapes and chips will look like eyes, and the apple wedges and spread become the frog's mouth.

Variation: Make apple monsters by using red apples and red grapes, or mix and match red and green. Break pretzel sticks into small pieces and insert in the spread to make monster teeth.

Banana sushi

Here's what you need:

- bananas (firm)
- whole-grain tortillas
- a spread such as peanut or cashew butter, or low-fat cream cheese or vegan cream cheese
- spoons
- plastic serrated knives

1. Use a knife to smear spread all over a tortilla.
2. Peel a banana. Place it at one end of the tortilla and roll it up.
3. Cut the roll into 1-inch pieces, and turn each piece on its side.

Salad with apple juice vinaigrette

Here's what you need:

- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- ½ cup apple juice
- ½ teaspoon minced garlic
- romaine lettuce or other greens
- assorted vegetables, fruits, and other salad toppings, such as cheese cubes and croutons
- measuring spoons
- plastic jar with lid
- large salad bowl
- plates
- small bowls for dipping

1. Place the first four ingredients in a jar and seal with the lid. Take turns shaking the jar to blend the vinaigrette. Pour a small amount into dipping bowl.
2. Tear small pieces of lettuce onto a plate. Add any additional salad toppings.
3. Dip one or two lettuce pieces into the vinaigrette and taste. The process of dipping may ease children who are unsure into trying the dressing on their entire salad portion.

Variation: Dip carrot sticks, apple slices, cucumber wedges, or sliced red peppers into the homemade vinaigrette as an alternative to eating over salad greens.



After introducing cooking-like activities and engaging in some independent cooking activities, think about simple meal preparation. In the classroom, meal preparation activities should be done in small groups of three or four children to ensure safety when using potentially harmful equipment. Children can usually manage using a hot plate, toaster oven, or microwave but must have adult supervision. Teach children to turn pan handles away from the edge, and use pot holders when removing a pot or pan from heat, for example. Teach safety with plastic or butter knives, such as holding it with the blade pointed down. Some possibilities:

- Children will love spreading tomato sauce on pizza dough or bagels and then sprinkling shredded cheese and healthful toppings on top to make homemade pizza. Heat the pizza in a toaster oven.
- Children can make quesadillas by spreading refried beans, shredded cheese, and healthful veggies between two tortillas. Heat in a toaster oven or microwave.
- Children can whisk eggs and milk in a bowl and pour the mixture into a small frying pan. Cook on a hot plate, with supervision, stirring once or twice. Serve the scramble as is, or roll it up in a tortilla with some salsa for a breakfast taco.

Encourage children to reflect on what they are doing: "How do the eggs look now that we have beaten them with the whisk?"

Discussions before, during, and after cooking experiences are critical to help children develop food-related skills and knowledge.

Look for opportunities to connect cooking activities to other academic areas, such as adding food-related books to the library center and making classroom recipe books. Encourage math and scientific practices, such as measuring, pouring, and observing chemical changes. Experiment with recipes, record the findings, and note tips for using a recipe another time, such as "Try less salt" and "Serves 4 generously."

A new attitude

Gradually over the years, Mary has learned the benefits of cooking in the kitchen. Today, she prepares healthy meals by using a Crock-pot® that she loads in the morning and allows to slow cook during the day. Her sons have grown and Nana is gone, but Mary puts her positive attitude toward cooking into practice with granddaughter Emma.

"When she comes to the house, we often make a meatloaf," Mary says with a smile. Emma gives directions on where to find a pan and helps beat the eggs. "We have a good time!"

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About the authors

Jamie Krenn, Ph.D., is an adjunct assistant professor heading the Children's Media: Analysis and Evaluation area of focus within the master's program of Cognitive Studies and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include the socio-emotional effects of media, children's educational television, and culinary cognition.

Alyse C. Hachey, Ph.D., is a professor in the Teacher Education Department at the Borough of Manhattan Community College-City University of New York. She is an educational psychologist whose teaching and research interests include a focus on early childhood cognition and curriculum development. ■