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OPINION | COMMENTARY

There's No School Like the Kitchen

Cooking helps kids learn, appreciate different cultures and refine their motor skills.



PHOTO: ISTOCK

By **LORRAINE ALLEN**

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My husband and I cook daily for our 8-year-old daughter because, like 15 million other Americans (an estimated two children per classroom), she has food allergies. For our daughter, this ritual is inspiring and educational. She loves helping out—rolling dough, mixing sauces—and creating her own dishes, from tarts to homemade linguine. At age 6 she opened her own allergy-friendly bakery. I'm no gourmet chef, but I spent much of my own childhood helping my grandmother in the kitchen, a lucky thing, I now know.

As our child grows, I've come to realize that helping in the kitchen develops far more than basic cooking skills. Children gain countless crucial developmental skills, and because they absorb these lessons in a hands-on, playful way, they are immediately engaged without parental nagging.

For toddlers, the kitchen is a perfect place to hone their gross and fine motor skills, using their hands to wash and peel produce, stir sauce, or dig out a measure of flour or pinch of salt. A preschooler will gain important cognitive skills from sorting forks and spoons, matching lids on sippy cups, and avoiding a hot stove.

Curious elementary school children can practice literacy skills when they decipher ingredient labels and recipe directions. As they create dishes more independently, they learn about nutrition, natural sciences and health. They sharpen math skills by weighing, measuring, adding, subtracting and multiplying ingredients. And in contrast to a classroom, after all those measurements, they can have their cake and eat it, too—at least a fraction of it.

At any age, and especially for children with dietary restrictions, the kitchen is a scientific laboratory. Are eggs off the menu because a child is at risk of anaphylaxis? Not a problem. Mix white vinegar with baking soda, and watch it instantly foam up and fizzle. Stir this magical concoction into cake or muffin batter as an egg replacement, and you'll get the same light, moist results.

Cooking opens minds to different ideas and cultures. Our travel options are limited by food allergies, but recently our daughter suggested going around the world from our

stove. After homemade Italian pizza, we hit China to prepare pork and ginger dumplings in shiitake broth. Next, we experimented with Mexican carnitas followed by a Moroccan tagine.

While preparing meals, children observe and assist caregivers as they stir boiling liquids, use oven mitts (or forget to), and adjust flames. In today's sterilized world, there is no place like the kitchen, where delectable things come together from dangerous tools such as fire and electric blenders, used routinely and calmly.

Parents today cover sharp corners and install baby gates. We want to keep our children safe, but the world cannot be padded and children must learn to manage danger to thrive. The kitchen provides a controlled space to sharpen and wield blades without fanfare or panic or elbow pads. A place where children learn from experience, by example, and by engaging their senses, and food can be safely prepared and enjoyed.

The kitchen fosters close connections, promotes self-sufficiency. Maybe best of all, when we learn to prepare food, we also learn to feed ourselves and others better. We improve our health, in addition to our knife skills. At the start and end of any day, the kitchen offers a life full of flavor, no matter the challenges.

Ms. Allen writes a blog at MixPlayEat.com.

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