



Fun' n Games 'n Growth

Play is more than just joy for kids—it's -vital for their development.



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By Corinne Garcia

Once upon a time, children roamed free: They would go from yard to yard, put together a game of baseball with the neighborhood kids and come back at dinnertime totally wiped out. Today, between school,

homework, computers and TVs, and a fear of letting children out of sight, this kind of free play has mostly gone out the window. Gone with it is a whole spectrum of growth and development opportunities, from communication skills and physical health to innovation and creativity, all of which play big roles in setting up children for a positive future.

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Cooking With Kids

One way to have fun and spend time together is to cook with your children. Family mealtime is especially important in a world where too many kids overload on fast-food burgers and pizza. As a result, child nutrition in the US is “abysmal,” says Kelly Dorfman, MS, LND, nutritionist in the Washington, DC area and author of *Cure Your Child With Food* (Workman). “This generation of children has the highest rate of food allergies, obesity, behavioral and emotional disorders, autoimmune disease and learning issues ever recorded.”

Part of the problem is a lack of time. According to a Cornell University study, working mothers spend about 3½ hours less per day than stay-at-home moms on grocery shopping and other food- and health-related tasks.

“Parents feel the time crunch when they get home, the pressure to crank out a healthy meal,” says Jill Castle, MS, RD, child nutrition consultant, blogger at Just the Right Byte (<http://justtherightbyte.com>) and coauthor (with Maryann Jacobsen) of *Fearless Feeding: How to Raise Healthy Eaters from High Chair to High School* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley). “When you’re pressed for time, you come up with different strategies just to get children to eat—going out, ordering takeout, fixing foods they will eat.”

As a result, “children have very little tolerance for what they don’t want so they end up eating pizza or pasta or chicken fingers every night,” Dorfman says.

According to Dorfman, the way out of this rut involves “parents owning their kitchens again. When you have meals together at home you can share information about nutrition, you can relax, you can control portions.”

Olivia Roszkowski, chef instructor at The Natural Gourmet Institute in New York City, teaches cooking to children. She finds that a good way to get kids’ attention is to offer them different meal and ingredient options. “When you show them delicious ways to make their own food, you always get a reaction, such as making your own applesauce or instead of getting processed yogurt, flavoring your own yogurt. I feel like offering them different alternatives always translates well, like showing them how to make your own kale chips.”

Roszkowski says youngsters also really enjoy hands-on learning. “I’ll demo something but I let them do everything. I teach them how to read recipes, knife skills, kitchen safety, how to plan and balance a meal.”

Dorfman agrees, saying, “We tend to give kids boring jobs, like setting the table, instead of more interesting jobs, like chopping and

mixing. They're dying to get their hands on that stuff." However, she notes that "you have to have some tolerance for mess. When you cook with children it's not going to be as efficient or neat as if you do it yourself." (Dorfman suggests cooking with kids on weekends or Friday nights for a more relaxed experience.)

Kitchen proficiency is as important for boys as it is for girls. "Everybody needs to know how to cook, it's a life skill," says Castle. Teaching kids about food and nutrition is just as important as showing them how to properly chop a carrot or make a marinara sauce. The best place to start is with meal planning.

"If you involve them in the planning, it becomes an activity and they get more excited about the food," Roszkowski says.

"Let the child pick what you have for dinner one night a week," suggests Dorfman. "I think getting kids involved lets them have some skin in the game. Let them know what the structure of the meal is—it has to include a salad or a whole grain, for example." That involvement should extend to getting food into the house. "If you were going to take your kid apple picking or blueberry picking, they're more likely to connect with the ingredients. Once kids have that connection, they take pride in what they make," says Roszkowski.

No one said that a transition from chicken fingers to baby greens will always be smooth. "Studies show that kids need to try a new food 15 to 20 times before they accept it," notes Castle. "So many parents just give up. The message is to keep trying."

Cooking with kids can make meal preparation more than just a necessary chore. "Eating together as a family is less about the food but more about the togetherness. That connection really seems to be what benefits children," says Castle. "I don't know a parent alive who does not enjoy watching their children enjoy food." —Lisa James

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