

Cooking With Students

The experience of cooking with students can range anywhere from a life-changing, rewarding class to a giant mess of yucky food. The most successful lessons take into account timing, minimize transitions, and maximize student-guided learning. Some best practices for cooking with larger groups of students are as follows:

Cooking Safety

Handwashing

Getting a large group of students to wash their hands is a time-consuming task. If there is not ample time in the lesson to allow for sink washing, consider hand sanitizer or wet wipes. Handwashing is the most important thing you can teach and enforce to cook and eat safely with your students. Demonstrate hand-washing, emphasizing the importance of removing all food from hands, washing every surface with hand soap for at least fifteen seconds, and rinsing thoroughly. A fun way to make sure students wash their hands long enough is to use a song: Scrub your hands with soap while singing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” or “Happy Birthday” twice through. Then you’re ready to rinse!

Demonstrate to students how to maintain clean hands while preparing food, such as “sandwich hands” (once clean, students must clasp their hands together until the directions for the lesson are delivered). For young students, explain that we do not touch the holes in our head—eye holes, nose holes, mouth hole, and ear holes.

- **Dish washing:** Demonstrate the process of dish washing, emphasizing the importance of removing all food, washing every surface with dish soap, rinsing thoroughly, and, if relevant at your site, sanitizing equipment with a quick dip in water with an extremely

dilute amount of bleach (one-half fluid ounce of bleach per gallon of water—check with school policy to ensure you can use bleach in the classroom). Leave dishes to air dry because wiping dry with a cloth contributes a greater risk of cross-contamination.

- **Food storage:** Follow ServSafe® food handler guidelines to avoid cross-contamination and foodborne illness. Most important, this includes time and temperature control to keep cool foods cold below 40 degrees and hot foods hot above 140 degrees. Store food in see-through containers so that you can remember what you have on hand. Label food by expiration date as well as the class that you plan to use it for. Do not use glass containers for cooking or storage; glass is a physical hazard for cooking with students because it may shatter and is often heavier than metal or plastic alternatives.

Cooking Safety

- **Allergies:** Always inquire about an updated allergy list to keep abreast of student food allergies. Ensure that other adults who will be assisting you are aware of these allergies. Do not cook with ingredients to which any of your students may have an allergic reaction (see p. 101 for details about handling allergies).
- **Cooking with heat:** Be sure to take precautions when cooking with heat, including setting up the burner in a safe space. Keep an eye out for cords that students may trip on. Turn pot handles inward as you cook so that students don’t bump the handle and spill a hot pot of food. Consider age-appropriateness when involving students. It may be a good idea for you to remove the pot from the burner and transfer it to a cooler container before serving from a hot pot. Always make the transfer of hot foods an adult responsibility instead of having a student do this task.

- **Aprons:** Encourage students to wear an apron when possible; this will help protect skin and clothes from spilled hot water or splattered oil.
- **Knives:** If students are using knives, consider doing a skill assessment to see how well they know how to use them before you start your lesson. Always consider the skill level of the group and age appropriateness of what you are asking students to do. Also consider class size and your ability to monitor each student and provide feedback and advice. Children are often capable of more than we give them credit for, and they can only learn a skill by trying it! However, safety is the top priority when using knives with students.

Knife safety rules

1. Keep the tip of the knife on the cutting board.
2. Go slow and stay low.
3. Make a bear claw with the hand holding the food.
4. Stay focused with your eyes on the job!
5. When you are finished using a knife, place it in a Dirty-Knife Bucket, or lay it on your cutting board, aiming the tip away from yourself.
6. To give a knife to someone else, put it down and ask them to pick it up.

NOTE: Keep knives in a container apart from other kitchen tools with a lid that snaps shut. It's also good practice to count your knives before and after a lesson as an extra safety precaution.

Knife Safety Tips

- **Knife safety demo:** Show students the chart of rules and go over each one. Create a gesture for each rule that students can mimic. For example, have them growl like a bear when they make their bear claw, or bug out their eyes when you talk about staying focused. Unless you are working with round tipped knives, dull knives are more dangerous than sharp knives. Consider if the knife type and sharpness are proper for the lesson.
- **Knife demonstration:** Model how to cut each vegetable students will be working with. Ideally the cutting surface is waist high. Students should be able to clearly see what they are cutting. Be sure to

go slowly and exaggerate and highlight the proper techniques you wish to see from them. Emphasize a solid hold on whatever is being cut, consider the thickness of the food, and demonstrate the appropriate size piece that you are aiming for. Say things like, *See how I keep the tip on the cutting board the whole time, and I just rock the knife back and forth. See where my other hand is when I'm cutting.* If your classroom has a document camera, project your demonstration so all students can easily see. Put your finished samples into small bowls, and give them to students for comparison when they're cutting.

- **Safety monitors:** Distribute trays to groups of students. Assign students pairs, and explain that each pair will have a chopper and a safety monitor, and they will be trading off halfway through. Say, *It is the job of the safety monitor to make sure that knife safety guidelines we discussed are being followed.* Then pass around knives individually. If you have other adults present, designate each to supervise one or two groups. Circulate through the room, guiding students to be safe and use proper technique. Give students a two-minute warning; when time is up, collect all knives, and have students clean their spaces.

Recommended Resources

- *Garden to Cafeteria Policies and Protocols* by Life Lab
- ServSafe® Certificate Course
- Institute of Child Nutrition Food Safety Resources
- Emergency Contacts and Accident Procedures in the *FoodCorps Handbook*

Cooking With Students Basics

Minimizing Mess

One trick to creating less of a mess during a lesson is to pass out small amounts of food and ingredients. It seems simplistic, but a large part of the waste after a large class is excess ingredients and wasted food. Students can share tools, and not everyone in the class needs to be doing the same

task (i.e., not everyone needs to use knives; different tools can be allocated to different groups). Keep reusable dish towels or paper towels on hand to wipe down tools and equipment like bowls and pans before taking them to a sink. With a large group of students, assign “materials management” roles—these students will be the only ones who pass out materials and help clean up as you go (great for the wiggly ones who can’t stay in their seats!). When preparing recipes with small tastes, always try to scale down materials (i.e., napkins or wax-paper pieces instead of plates and paper sample cups for a utensil-free bite of food).

Managing a Group

The expectations for a large group of students are different from those of a small group of ten to fifteen. First, all students will not do every task; instead, divide and conquer. Split into teams or pairs to learn new skills or execute multiple parts of a recipe. When planning for a larger group, think of a recipe that will provide enough roles for everyone, and each role should take about the same amount of time. At the beginning of class, introduce a clear signal for getting everyone’s attention—ringing a bell or a call and response—so that voice-raising is minimal. Address misbehaviors immediately with a no-nonsense tone and appropriate consequences, ideally based on existing classroom expectations. Positively reinforce excellent behavior loudly and often.

Making Cleanup Easy

Make cleanup easy by breaking your class into weekly rotations and assigning each group age-appropriate tasks that emphasize cleanup as a fun group activity! The “sweepers” can sweep the floor, the “washers” can wash dishes, the “dryers” can dry dishes, and the “trash crew” can dispose of waste or recycle. Make sure to build enough time into your lesson plan to allow for cleanup to be part of the activity.

Sourcing Food

When working with a small budget, sourcing food requires a bit of creativity and imagination. Consider exploring the following sources:

- **Donations and/or gleaning:** It is important to prioritize paying farmers for the fresh foods they can provide for your programming, if possible. However, local farms and gardens may have produce “seconds” that they offer at a reduced rate or offer opportunities to glean produce from their fields for your classes.
- **Cafeteria:** Your cafeteria may have leftovers that are salvageable for your recipes. Make sure to check expiration dates, and store your leftovers appropriately to follow ServSafe® safety protocol!
- **Check with your food service director** to see if your school participates in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. This program provides funding for fresh fruit and vegetables to be served outside the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program meal service times such as for snacks, demonstrations, and education (with some restrictions). If your school is participating, it submitted an application that includes an implementation plan you should inquire about and refer to in planning to connect with this program.

Considering Students’ Access to Food

Before introducing a new food to your students, consider the following questions:

1. Can students or caregivers access the food fairly easily on foot, by public transportation, or with a short car ride?
2. Can students’ caregivers adapt the food into existing recipes and meals they create at home?
3. How will recipes you share with students be shared with caregivers or families?
4. Is the food accessible in canned or frozen form? Both of these options can be considerably more affordable.
5. Can the food round out a meal and provide dense nutrition for an affordable cost?

Recommended Resources

- “Building the Case for Racial Equity in the Food System,” Center for Social Inclusion
- “An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System,” Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems

Selecting Recipes

- 1. Prep time and cook time:** Think about what produce may need to be washed and peeled before class. Consider how long it takes to set up your cooking stations. Additionally, take into account the amount of time it will take to prepare a recipe, considering the scale of the tools available to you; most recipes are designed to be used in full-scale kitchens.
- 2. Accessible ingredients:** Always keep your student demographic in mind. Consider budget-friendly options that your students and their caregivers can access within a short walk, bus ride, or drive.
- 3. Student interest and growth:** Checking with students to find out what types of recipes interest them is an excellent way to begin your search. Feel free, at your discretion, to search for recipes that challenge students’ taste buds, too! Administering student surveys helps determine how to pinpoint the best recipes for the future.
- 4. One old, one new:** The “one old, one new” guideline allows students to try a dish that features “one old” food (a food they might already be familiar with) in the same meal that they try “one new” food (a food that is unfamiliar). You can also say “bridge foods” for old foods because they help move from old foods to new foods. Look for recipes that feature familiar and unfamiliar foods to support and challenge your students!
- 5. Culturally appropriate:** Ensure that the recipe is appropriate for your student group. Some cultures do not eat specific meats or have a high number of community members who are lactose intolerant. Although it is important to introduce students to new, healthy foods, remember to consider how the cultural context informs what foods are selected.

