

Cooking With Kids

The Fundamentals of K-5 Food Education

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Why Cooking with Kids Matters

Cooking with students is a powerful way to build life skills, reinforce academic concepts, and foster positive relationships with food. It transforms classrooms into hands-on learning environments where students practice collaboration, problem-solving, and cultural exploration.

Cooking helps students develop fine motor skills, make math and literacy connections, and grow confidence in their abilities. It also promotes social-emotional learning by encouraging teamwork, responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment.

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Cooking Classroom Setup and Structure



A structured classroom environment helps make cooking experiences productive and fun. Model safe behaviors consistently and narrate actions so students can follow along. Repetition and visual reminders help reinforce safety habits over time.

Classroom Routines and Procedures

Set clear norms for participation before beginning any cooking activity. Practice these expectations ahead of time to build confidence and reduce risk. Establish routines for:



- ☐ **Starting and ending the class period**
- ☐ **Where to sit**
- ☐ **How to handle materials**
- ☐ **How to ask for help**
- ☐ **How to transition** (e.g., hand washing, cooking stations, cleanup)

Individual Student Roles

Assigning specific roles teaches accountability and leadership, while helping to keep lessons running smoothly. Teach students how to perform each role and use the same roles consistently across lessons.



Material Manager

Gathers ingredients and tools



Timekeeper

Keeps the group on track by watching the clock



Recipe Reader

Reads the steps out loud so nothing gets missed



Cleanup Captain

Wipes up spills and handles compost/trash



Safety Supervisor

Make sure tools are used correctly

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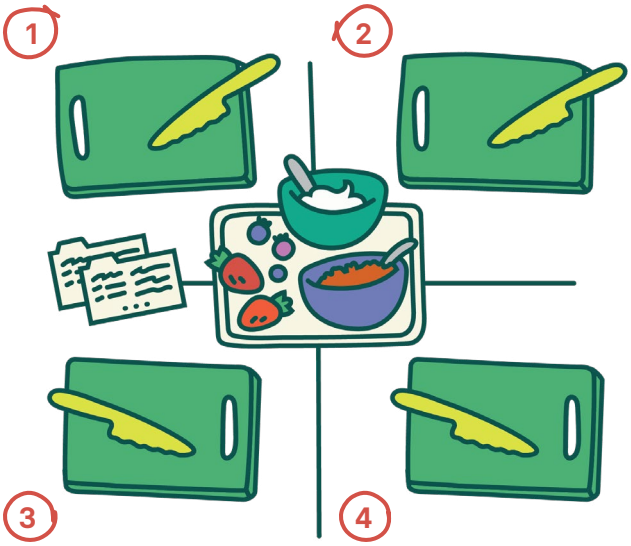
Cooking in Stations

Organize the classroom into stations or small groups to keep students engaged. Supervise at all times and keep all students in sight if possible.

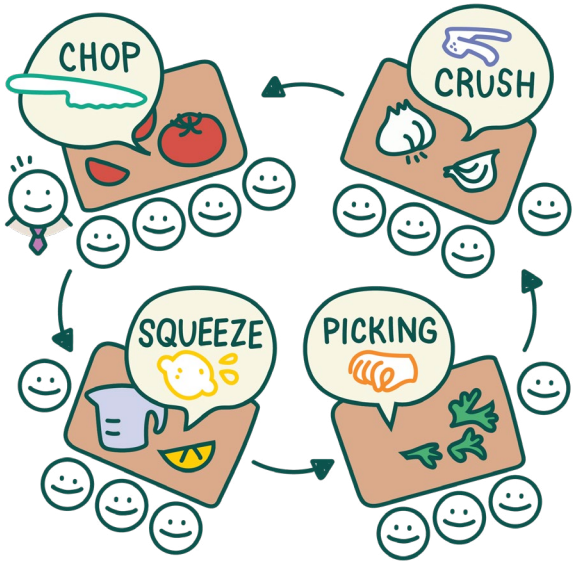
Two ways to make stations:



Stationary Small Groups

Each station is set up **identically** with all materials needed to complete the full recipe. Following a central demonstration, **students complete the entire process** at their own tables while a teacher circulates to provide guidance. Students should rotate active tasks, such as using equipment, stirring, or adding ingredients, at designated intervals during the station work so that everyone gets a turn.

A small group station set up to prepare yogurt and berry parfaits. One tray per station.



Recipe Step Rotations

Each station is dedicated to a **specific task**, such as chopping vegetables or measuring dry ingredients, and students rotate through them in **timed rounds**. This model allows an adult to facilitate a "high-support" station, like teaching knife skills, while other groups manage independent tasks like picking herb leaves. Each task should require a similar amount of time to maintain a balanced flow.



Example of recipe step rotations to prepare pico de gallo.

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Cleanup

Tips for a Mess-Free Lesson



Portion ingredients: Distribute small amounts of food to each group. Excess ingredients are the leading cause of food waste—and messy workstations.



Share tools: Not every student needs a knife or a peeler at once. Rotating tools among groups reduces clutter and supports safety.



Two-part cleaning: Keep reusable dish towels or paper towels at each station. Instruct students to wipe down bowls and pans to remove food residue before taking them to the communal sink.



Student Cleanup Routines

Assign age-appropriate roles to make cleanup a collective responsibility:

- ☐ **Sweepers:** Clear the floor of any fallen scraps or spills
- ☐ **Washers:** Scrub used tools and containers
- ☐ **Dryers:** Dry all equipment thoroughly before putting away
- ☐ **Trash Crew:** Manage waste disposal and sort recycling

Pro Tip

Build at least 10 minutes of cleanup time into the lesson plan so students don't feel rushed and the classroom stays organized.

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Recipe and Resource Planning



Considerations when Selecting Recipes

- **Prep time and cook time:** Think about which produce may need to be washed and peeled before class. Consider how long it will take to set up cooking stations.
- **Equipment availability:** Take note of the tools available. Consider no-bake or one-bowl recipes. Encourage creative substitutions for everyday items, such as using mason jars for mixing, to make cooking feel accessible while building student confidence and problem-solving skills.
- **Keeping hands busy:** Choose recipes that offer enough roles to keep every student involved.
- **Accessible ingredients:** Consider readily available, budget-friendly options that students and caregivers can access if they want to try the recipe at home.
- **"One old, one new":** Look for recipes that feature both familiar and unfamiliar foods. The "one old, one new" approach allows students to try a dish that features a familiar food—also called a "bridge" food—alongside an unfamiliar one.

Check out the FoodCorps Recipe Book for kid-friendly ideas!

- **Student-driven:** Ask students what types of foods or recipes interest them.
- **Culturally responsive:** Use recipes that reflect and respect the cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds of all students and their families. This affirms students' identities while giving others a chance to experience a wide variety of food traditions.
- **Community-rooted:** Learn students' cultural and religious dietary restrictions, which may include pork, beef, dairy, or other foods. Choose recipes that introduce new foods while respecting the dietary rules and traditions students follow at home.

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Tool Substitutions



Mason jars → Great for mixing



Milk jugs and hand soap → Outdoor handwashing station



Fork → Mashing small ingredients (like garlic)



Potato masher or mortar and pestle → Substitute food processor

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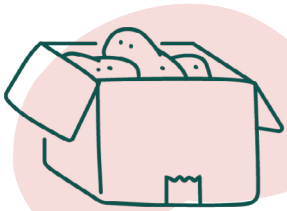
Sourcing Food



Donations and/or Gleaning

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 classroom activities.



School Garden

Sourcing produce from the school garden can strengthen garden-to-table connections for students. While harvesting from the garden to cook, keep crops that have been cleaned separate from those that haven't.



USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

Ask the school's food service director whether the 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). Talk with the food service director to see how these funds can support cooking lessons.



Cafeteria

The school cafeteria may have leftovers that are usable for recipes. Make sure to check expiration dates, and follow food handling safety guidelines to store leftovers.

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Safety with Students



Cooking with Heat

When using heat sources, set clear boundaries and roles. Only trained students should directly use burners, hot plates, or ovens.

- ✓ Set up **burner** in a safe space
- ✓ Tuck **cords** away to prevent a tripping hazard
- ✓ Keep **pot handles** turned inward
- ✓ Transfer food from a hot pot to a **cooler container** before serving
- ✓ Only adults should **transfer** hot foods
- ✓ Create a "no-go zone" of **3 feet** around ovens in use
- ✓ Teach students not to touch an **oven** in use, including **handle** and **knobs**
- ✓ Have students wear **aprons** when available to protect skin and clothes from spilled ingredients and splattered oil.



Treating Minor Burns

Always keep first-aid supplies nearby and get to know the school's protocols for injuries, including how to reach the school nurse.

1. Cool the burn as soon as possible under clean, cool, running water for 20 minutes. If not available, use clean, lukewarm water or apply a cool or cold compress.
2. Never use ice, ice water, or a freezing compress to cool a burn. Doing so can cause more damage to the skin.
3. Leave the burn uncovered and follow school procedures for injuries.

Adapted from guidance by the American Red Cross

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Knife Safety

Knife skills are an essential part of food education for **all ages** but require careful instruction, supervision, and age-appropriate tools.

While using sharp tools:

- ✓ Keep knives at the center of the table or distribute knives after instructions are given
- ✓ Keep all students in sight
- ✓ Consider small groups, staggered use of knives, or bringing in extra adults for easier monitoring



Pro Tip

Unless working with round tipped knives, dull knives are more dangerous than sharp knives.

Introduce knives as tools that require respect and focus. Begin with demonstrations and guided practice by **modeling how** to cut each vegetable. Demonstrate a **solid hold** on whatever is being cut, consider the **thickness of the food,** and show the **appropriate-size** cut for the recipe. Before small group work, have each student demonstrate proper knife handling.

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Common cutting and chopping tools with recommended ages

Crinkle Cutter



All ages (2+)

Ideal for toddlers and beginners. The vertical pressing motion allows for safe, stable chopping of firm vegetables like cucumbers or potatoes.

Y-Peeler



2nd grade and up

Always model peeling away from the body and keeping the "holding hand" clear of the blade's path.

Wooden-Handle Knife



Pre-K–1st grade

Designed for small hands to practice the "sawing" motion. Perfect for soft fruits and veggies while protecting little fingers

Box Grater



3rd grade and up

Requires focus and palm pressure. Use for cheese or sturdy veggies. Teach students to stop when the food item gets small to protect fingertips.

Nylon/Safety Knives



K–5th grade

Use soft items for K–1st grades, and progress to harder produce for 2nd–5th grades.

Paring Knife



4th grade and up

A student's first "real" metal blade. Best for small, precise tasks like hulling strawberries or slicing small fruit once safety grips are mastered.

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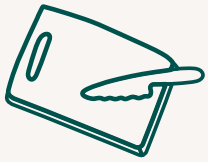
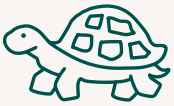
Display knife rules and review prior to each lesson.

OUR CLASSROOM KNIFE RULES



Keep the tip of the knife on the cutting board



Go slow and stay low



Make a bear claw with the hand holding the food



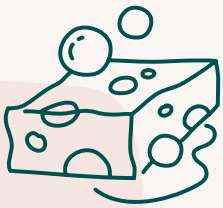
Stay focused with your eyes on the task



When not in use, lay the knife flat on the cutting board with the tip pointed away from everyone.



Pass safely:
Set the knife down on a flat surface and let the next person pick it up.



Cleanup and Storage

- **Count** knives before and after a lesson as an extra safety precaution.
- Place used knives in a **dedicated bucket** with the sharp end pointed down. Only adults should clean the knives.
- Store knives in a **separate container** apart from other kitchen tools with a lid that snaps shut.

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The "Claw" Technique

The claw technique is the best way to keep fingers safe while preparing ingredients. Keeping fingertips tucked and using knuckles as a shield significantly reduces the risk of injury. Safety always comes before speed or precision.

How to do it:

- Curl fingertips inward toward the palm, making a "claw" shape.
- Rest knuckles against the side of the knife blade (this acts as a physical guide).
- Use thumb and pinky to steady the food while middle fingers stay tucked away.
- As you cut, slide your "claw" back, always keeping fingertips behind the blade's edge.



Treating Minor Cuts and Scrapes

Always keep first-aid supplies nearby and get to know the school's protocols for injuries, including how to reach the school nurse.

1. Wash hands before caring for the injury to reduce the risk of infection.
2. Stop the bleeding by applying gentle pressure with a clean cloth or bandage. If possible, raise the injured area until bleeding slows or stops.
3. Clean the wound by rinsing under clean, running water. Wash the surrounding skin with soap, but do not put soap directly on the wound. Remove any visible dirt or debris.
4. Apply a thin layer of antibiotic ointment or petroleum jelly to keep the wound moist and help prevent infection.
5. Cover the cut with a clean bandage or dressing to keep it protected. For very minor scrapes, leaving it uncovered may be acceptable.

Adapted from guidance by Mayo Clinic

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Food Handling

Safe food handling helps prevent cross-contamination and foodborne illness. Find out the school and district-based expectation for food handling certification.

Storage

Label food with expiration dates and the class that will be using it.

Use metal or plastic containers (instead of glass).

Control temperatures to keep cool foods below 40 degrees F and hot foods above 140 degrees F.

NOTE ON RAW PROTEINS

While it is best to avoid raw meat or fish when cooking with students, if they are used, maintain clear separation. Use color-coordinated equipment (boards, bowls, and utensils) to distinguish between what's used for raw meat vs. other ingredients.

Dishwashing

Establish consistent routines: Demonstrate the full process to students, emphasizing the removal of all food debris before washing.

Thorough cleaning: Wash every surface of the tools with dish soap and rinse completely.

Sanitization: If required, dip equipment in a sanitizing solution (one-half fluid ounce of bleach per gallon of water) in accordance with school policy.

Air dry only: Allow dishes to air dry. Using a cloth for drying is discouraged as it increases the risk of cross-contamination.

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Handwashing and Hygiene Basics

The 15-second rule

Scrub every surface of the hands with soap for at least fifteen seconds before rinsing thoroughly. (For younger students, encourage them to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or "Happy Birthday" twice while scrubbing.)

"Sandwich hands"

Once hands are clean, students should clasp them together—like a sandwich—until the lesson directions are delivered. This prevents students from touching hair, faces, or surfaces before handling food.

Establish a no-touch rule

Teach students to avoid touching any "holes" in their heads—eyes, noses, mouths, and ears—to prevent the spread of germs while handling food.

Post a visual hand-washing step chart near sinks.



What about Hand Sanitizer?

If soap and water are unavailable, use a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of hands and rub hands and fingers together until dry. This should take around 20 seconds.

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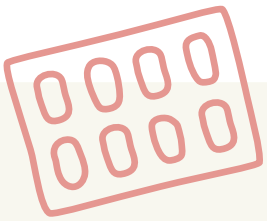
Allergies and Dietary Needs

Before cooking with students

- Collect updated student allergy information in advance.
- Don't use any ingredients in a cooking lesson if there is a student in the class or cafeteria who is allergic to them.
- Share student allergies with any adults supporting the activity.
- Review school protocols for severe allergic reactions in advance.





Treating Allergic Reactions

Review school emergency protocols in advance, including how to quickly summon a CPR-certified staff member. Do not assume you are qualified to provide advanced care or administer medications.

- Ask the student if they have a known food allergy and look for symptoms such as hives, swelling (face, lips, or throat), trouble breathing, vomiting, or dizziness.
- If symptoms are mild (itching, small rash), notify the teacher or school nurse and monitor the student closely.
- Have the student sit upright, or lie down if they feel faint.
- Do not give food or drink.

If symptoms are severe (trouble breathing, throat swelling, repeated vomiting, or faintness), call for help immediately and alert a CPR-certified staff member or the nurse.



If the student has an epinephrine auto-injector ("EpiPen"):

- ✓ Help them use it only if you are trained and school policy allows, or alert a trained adult.
- ✓ Older students may be able to self-administer.
- ✓ Follow the school procedure for emergency services (e.g., call 911) if epinephrine is given.

Adapted from guidance by the American Red Cross First Aid/CPR/AED guidelines

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During cooking activities

- Use visual icons next to all ingredient lists or labels to quickly communicate dietary restrictions (e.g., dairy-free, nut-free).
- Avoid cross-contamination via utensils and cutting boards during preparation.

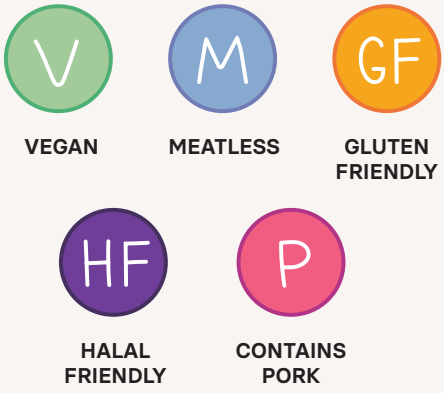
Most Common Food Allergies in Children

Avoid using ingredients with common allergens:

- Cow milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Soy
- Wheat
- Nuts from trees (such as walnuts, pistachios, peacons, cashews)
- Fish (such as tuna, salmon, cod)
- Shellfish (such as shrimp, lobster)

Dietary Needs Icons

These letter icons mean THIS DISH IS:



These allergen icons mean THIS DISH CONTAINS:



Source: https://harrisburg.psu.edu/story/28356/2021/06/23/new-menu-item-cards-allergen-icons-help-students-navigate-campus-dining

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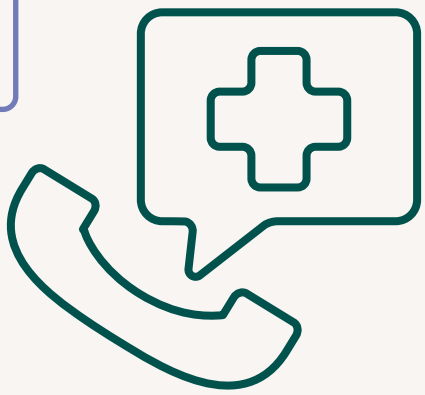
What to do if someone is choking

Review school emergency protocol in advance, including how to quickly summon a CPR-certified staff member. Do not assume you are qualified to perform advanced care.

1. Ask the person if they are choking. If they can cough, speak, or breathe, encourage them to keep coughing.

2. If they cannot cough, speak, or breathe, call for help immediately and alert a CPR-certified staff member or the nurse.



3. Stay with the person and monitor them closely until trained help arrives.

4. *If trained*, give abdominal thrusts (Heimlich maneuver). Continue until the object is forced out or the person can breathe again.

5. If the person becomes unconscious, call 911 and begin CPR *if trained*, or follow instructions from emergency services.

Adapted from guidance by the American Red Cross First Aid/CPR/AED guidelines

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Appendices

A. Tool and Equipment List

Essential

- Sharp knives (serrated, chef, paring) and sheaths
- Kid-friendly knives
- Cutting mats
- Vegetable peelers
- Box grater
- Salad spinner
- Strainer/colander
- Mixing bowls
- Whisks
- Wooden mixing spoons
- Silicone tongs
- Nylon square spatula
- Nylon slotted spoon
- Citrus reamer
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Liquid measuring cups
- Blender
- Food processor (manual or electric)
- First aid kit
- Dish tub, soap, sponge/cloth
- Dish towels
- Kitchen timer
- Utensils, plates, cups

Heat Sources and Related Supplies

- Electric griddle
- Convection oven
  - Extra baking pan and wire rack (inside oven)
- Induction burner
  - Induction skillet (12-inch)
  - Stock pot (10-quart)
- Oven mitts

Pantry Items

- Extra virgin olive oil
- Vinegar (balsalmic, rice vinegar, apple cider)
- Dried spices (cumin, paprika, oregano, garlic powder)
- Salt and pepper
- Honey

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