Cooking: Mash, pour, measure, and more

Invite your children into the kitchen to help you cook. They’ll learn about healthy eating, cooking techniques, and meal planning.

Experiment away
Fish-shaped crackers instead of croutons in salad? A mashed-potato- and-pea parfait? Why not! Provide healthy ingredients, then step back and let your youngsters be creative. They’ll become comfortable in the kitchen, and they’ll be more likely to eat food they make themselves. Idea: Suggest that they write and illustrate their recipes on index cards.

Put on a show
Pretend you’re a famous chef on a cooking show and your children are the audience. Demonstrate how to use a salad spinner or a whisk. (“I’m putting the lid on this spinner. Now I’m rotating the handle, and voila! It spins the water out of the lettuce.”) Then, let your youngsters take turns being the celebrity chef and explaining techniques.

Use teamwork
Have each person pick a food group (vegetables, fruits, grains, protein, dairy) and choose an ingredient from that group. Then, work together to make a meal that incorporates everything. Say you pick sweet potato, apple, whole-wheat tortillas, black beans, and cheese. Perhaps you’ll make sweet potato-bean-cheese enchiladas with a side of apple slices.

March: Lion or lamb?

As the saying goes, “March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb.” Stay active regardless of the weather with these suggestions.

On a windy day...
Blow up a balloon, and go outdoors for a game of “windball.” Set the balloon in the middle of the yard, and chase it around as the wind blows it. After someone catches it, he bats it away with his hand to start the game again. The first player to catch the balloon five times wins.

On a calm day...
Head to a playground for a game of follow the leader—just like little lambs. Your child might have your family tiptoe on a balance beam, swing across the monkey bars, climb a ladder, and go down a twisty slide.
Breakfasts that boost brainpower

A healthy breakfast fuels your child’s brain on test day—and every day. Here are four simple ways to provide the carbohydrate-fat-protein combo that promotes concentration, memory, and thinking.

1. **Leafy greens.** Toss a few leaves of spinach, kale, or chard into the blender when you make your youngster a fruit smoothie. Serve alongside a whole-wheat bagel or English muffin topped with fat-free cream cheese.

2. **Berries.** Let your child stir blueberries, raspberries, or strawberries into his oatmeal or Greek yogurt for a smart start.

3. **Eggs.** Top a whole-grain waffle with scrambled eggs, and have your youngster fold it like a taco. Or keep hard-boiled eggs in the refrigerator. For a complete breakfast, serve eggs alongside cereal and a banana.

4. **Avocados.** The good fat in avocados promotes healthy brain development. Your child can mash half of an avocado, spread it on whole-wheat toast, and sprinkle on red pepper flakes if he likes “heat.”

**Cut back on processed foods**

I know that many packaged snacks and frozen dinners have too much sugar, salt, and fat, but they’re so convenient! I mentioned this to the cafeteria manager at my son Isaiah’s school, and she had good advice.

She suggested we look for foods that are close to what you’d find in nature. Now Isaiah and I use her “test” at the store. I’ll ask, “Do apple chips grow on trees?” and he’ll say, “No, but apples do!”

Also, we try to buy foods with fewer ingredients, since the cafeteria manager said those tend to be less processed. For example, we’ve started making “real” versions of frozen entrees. This week, we passed up microwave fettuccine alfredo and bought frozen plain broccoli, whole-grain pasta, olive oil, and Parmesan cheese. Dinner took a little longer, but it tasted better, and it was more nutritious.

**Activity Corner**

**I’m a runner!** Running is a great whole-body workout for your youngster. Lace up your sneakers, and try these running games.

**Run, walk, run**

Help your child gradually work up to running longer distances. Take turns choosing a spot (a tree, a building). Run to it, walk for 30 seconds, and pick the next destination. At first, aim for something nearby, like the stop sign at the end of the block. Soon maybe you’ll run all the way to her school.

**Find the “treasure”**

Build speed with this game. Let your child collect 20 small objects (Rubik’s Cube, paperweight, tennis ball) in a basket. Head to a nearby field, and scatter the items around, leaving plenty of space to run between them. Now have everyone run to gather the objects, one at a time, and return each to the basket.

**Shake-a-salad**

That’s the winning formula behind fun-for-you and good-for-you salad shake-ups.

To assemble: Give your child an empty container. Have her fill it with any of these combinations, put the lid on, and shake, shake, shake.

- **Deli delight.** Chunks of leftover deli meat (lean ham, turkey, or roast beef), shredded skin mozzarella cheese, chopped lettuce, grape tomatoes, and low-fat ranch dressing.

- **Southwest slam.** Cooked lean ground beef, chopped lettuce, shredded low-fat cheddar cheese, diced tomatoes, and a sprinkling of low-sodium taco seasoning.

- **Pasta mix-up.** Cooked macaroni, black olives, chopped red pepper, grated Parmesan cheese, and Italian dressing.

**Tip:** Add something that makes a “shake sound,” such as nuts or baked pita chips, to put even more fun in the shaking.
Fast food can be healthy food—and here’s a collection of recipes that show you how. Each one is high in nutrition and low in fat, sugar, and salt. Plus, they’re easy for you or your teen to make. (When younger children are cooking, stay nearby for safety’s sake.) Bon appétit!

**Breakfast**

**Apple Raisin French Toast**
There’s no need for syrup in this naturally sweet, nutritious twist on the breakfast standard.

**You’ll need:**
- 2 beaten eggs or ½ cup egg substitute
- ½ cup fat-free milk
- 8 slices raisin bread
- ¼ cup apple butter
- 2 tsp. chopped pecans

Combine eggs and milk in a shallow bowl. Dip bread slices into mixture to coat both sides. Bake in a preheated waffle baker or nonstick pan until browned, turning once. Spread apple butter on top, and sprinkle with pecans.

**Fruit Smoothie**
Smoothie flavors are limited only by your child’s imagination. Suggest this strawberry-orange version, or have him invent his own.

**You’ll need:**
- 2 cups fat-free milk
- 1 cup fat-free vanilla yogurt
- ½ cup 100% orange juice
- 2 cups fresh or frozen strawberries

Combine all ingredients in a blender until no large chunks remain. Top with a whole strawberry, and drink up!

**Lunch**

**Colorful Couscous Salad**
Couscous cooks in a jiffy. Use this recipe to make a healthy salad your family is sure to love.

Combine couscous and boiling water in a large bowl, and cover for 5 minutes. Fluff with a fork, and cool for a few minutes. Stir in mint, tomatoes, bell pepper, and raisins. Add dressing, and mix well.

**Note:** This salad is good warm, at room temperature, or cold.

**You’ll need:**
- 1 cup couscous
- ½ cups boiling water
- ¼ cup fresh mint, chopped
- 8–10 grape tomatoes, halved
- 1 red or green bell pepper, diced
- 2 tsp. raisins
- Low-fat Italian dressing

**Pita Pocket**
If you want freshness, fiber, and flavor, this is the lunch for you and your teen.

Slit the pitas, and spread mustard inside. Stuff each one with mushrooms, tomato, and cucumber. Add turkey (or omit for a vegetarian version). Spoon in the mashed avocado. Wrap the sandwiches in foil to enjoy on the go, or savor them at home.

**You’ll need:**
- 4 whole-wheat pitas
- Dijon mustard
- 8 mushroom, sliced
- 1 tomato, sliced
- 1 cucumber, peeled and sliced
- 4 lean turkey slices (optional)
- 2 ripe avocados, peeled and mashed
**Chicken Tacos**

For a fun dinner, set up a “taco bar.” Put each ingredient in a separate bowl, and line up the bowls on the kitchen table or counter. Then, let everyone make their own tacos.

Sprinkle taco mix over chicken, and gently stir. Fill taco shells with desired ingredients.

**You’ll need:**
- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cooked and shredded
- ½ packet low-sodium taco seasoning mix
- ½ cup low-fat refried beans
- 1 tomato, diced
- ⅛ head lettuce, shredded
- 1 cup low-fat Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 4 taco shells

**Pasta Time**

Almost in the time it takes to cook the pasta, this hearty sauce will be ready.

Cook pasta according to package directions. Meanwhile, sauté onion and garlic in a pan (coated with nonstick olive oil spray) until soft, about 5 minutes. Add ground beef, if desired, and cook until no pink remains. Add herbs, tomatoes, and artichokes, and cook 2–3 minutes longer. Stir in tomato sauce, and heat until warm. Drain pasta and top with sauce. Serve with Parmesan.

**You’ll need:**
- pasta, any style (multi-grain if possible)
- onion, sliced
- garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 lb. lean ground beef (optional)
- 1 tsp. basil
- 1 tsp. oregano
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 14-oz. can artichoke hearts, chopped
- 1 16-oz. can tomato sauce
- Parmesan cheese

**Dessert**

**Fruit Dip**

This is a great way to add fruit to your family’s diet. Dip and enjoy!

In a blender or food processor, combine all ingredients, except fruit, until smooth. Chill in refrigerator, about 2 hours. Use as a dip for the fresh fruit. **Tip:** Thread fruit pieces onto wooden skewers for a kid-friendly presentation.

**You’ll need:**
- ¹⁄³ cup fat-free ricotta cheese
- ¹⁄³ cup fat-free vanilla yogurt
- 1 tbsp. powdered sugar
- 1 tbsp. orange juice
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- assorted fruit (strawberries, blueberries, grapes, sliced apples, sliced pears, cubed cantaloupe)

**Hummus and Veggies**

This healthy Mediterranean snack is sure to please kids in any country.

In a blender or food processor, mix beans, oil, garlic, and lemon juice. Lightly salt, if desired. Dip the pita pieces and vegetables into the hummus. **Tip:** Add hummus to a sandwich, and you’ll add flavor and fiber.

**You’ll need:**
- 1 15-oz. can garbanzo beans (chickpeas)
- ¼ cup sesame oil
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- juice of 1 lemon
- salt (optional)
- whole-wheat pita, torn into pieces
- assorted raw vegetables (carrots, celery, cauliflower, broccoli, sugar snap peas)

**Grab ‘n’ go**

Sometimes even the fastest recipes aren’t fast enough. When your child has to get out the door in five minutes, try these quick and healthy choices.

- **Mexican breakfast wrap:** Make these the night before and refrigerate. For 1 wrap, whisk together 2 eggs and ¼ cup of fat-free milk, and scramble (in a pan coated with nonstick spray) until set. Place on a whole-wheat tortilla, top with salsa and shredded low-fat cheddar cheese, and roll up. (Ready to microwave in the morning.)
- **Trail mix:** In a zipper bag, combine equal amounts of nuts (peanuts, cashews, almonds), whole-grain cereal, raisins, and sunflower seeds.
- **Apple peanut butter treat:** Spread peanut butter on a slice of whole-wheat bread. Top with thin apple slices, and fold in half.

**Snacks**

- **Popcorn, Italian Style**
  - 2 cups air-popped popcorn
  - 1 tbsp. olive oil
  - pepper to taste
  - Parmesan cheese

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- 1 tbsp. olive oil
- pepper to taste
- Parmesan cheese

**Editor’s Note:** *Teen Food & Fitness™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.*