

Family-Led Learning, a column by Kristin Marshall

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This depiction of natural learning represents my own point-of-view, and is not meant to represent the opinions of any other homelearning options. Please take what works for you and leave the rest behind.

Homelearning In the Kitchen

What are the words that every mother dreads hearing the most? More than “Is it okay to eat those red bugs on the driveway, because I just ate some?” More than “Bobby just got a dirt bike, can I have one too?” And even more than “Everybody hates me! You don’t understand!”

Brace yourself. Here they are: “Can I help cook dinner, Mom?”

Yes, those six small words are enough to strike fear into the heart of even the most courageous mother. There is something about this plaintive request at the end of a busy day—during which I have helped and been helped more than I really wanted—that makes me want to run the other way and hide.

However, years ago I decided that I didn’t want to say “no” to this request. I wanted to welcome my kids into the kitchen, even though a lot of the time I didn’t want to, if you know what I mean. So I decided to respond by taking a deep breath, putting a smile on my face, and saying “of course!” in the most genuine tone I could muster. And I am so glad I did.

Why? Because cooking with my kids is fun. It’s educational. And it helps build relationships. I know this sounds like jargon, but let me explain.

Fun? You betcha. But it won’t be fun if you’re in a rush and you’re trying to get things done. It’s no fun if you’re focussed on product rather than process. To be fun, cooking with kids has to take a lot of time. Try starting dinner at least half an hour earlier than you normally do, to allow for inexperienced helpers. Or allot an entire morning—or a day—to baking cookies. Expect mess. Resign yourself to sweeping the floor afterwards. Want to cut down on the clean-up? Consider letting your youngest helpers work naked, if they are so inclined (cuts down on laundry!). Some of our favourite memories are of teddy bear birthdays, when my children would announce that it was some special furry creature’s birthday (sometimes every week!). We would bake a cake together—something basically healthy, like whole wheat zucchini cake, with icing and candles—and celebrate by eating cake for breakfast or lunch. We had fun at the time, and even more fun in retrospect.

Educational? Absolutely. For little ones, there's the counting, everything from setting the table (how many forks? how many plates?) to scooping flour. For older kids, start with measuring—learn about Fahrenheit and Celsius, cups, teaspoons, tablespoons, millilitres, grams, and so on. Convert imperial to metric, or vice versa. Move on to fractions. Double and triple the fractions when cooking for a crowd or freezing extra meals. Demonstrate your ability, and theirs, to follow oral or written directions. And wrap up with some science—think yeast, acids, bases, and chemical reactions. (I can just see everyone ticking off those Prescribed Learning Outcomes!) And don't forget some of the most important lessons of all—how to provide for yourself, how to use a knife and a stove safely, how to work together to get a job done, how to contribute to the family, and that sense of pride in being competent. I especially love it when my kids develop a “specialty,” that they can make independently and feel proud of—one boy does salads, the other fries wiener slices, and they both think they're great.

Building relationships? That's the best part. While we're cooking, we're talking. My kids want to know where the recipes come from, so I tell them about my mother, my grandmother, my relatives back in Norway. They can't know these people in person, so what we talk about is all they know of their family history. I share some of my childhood memories. And they share with me. Cooking together has become a quiet, intimate time for me and my stepdaughter. She uses this time to ask me questions, like, “How can you tell if you like a boy?” and “What do you do if a boy likes you?” These are conversations I really want to have.

My three older kids (now 9, 11, and 12) didn't actually become helpful helpers until about age 7 or 8. My youngest (4) tries so hard to be like me, that she really does help much of the time. It is worth it, to me, to take a deep breath and invite them into my workspace. After all, as homelearners, we can take all the time we need. At the end of the day (and the end of their childhood), I want my kids to feel valued in the kitchen, not just tolerated.

Here's a fun cookie recipe, that even a young child can do on her own. There are no eggs, so there's no reason not to lick fingers. In a large mixing bowl, dump 1 cup of brown sugar, 2 cups of oatmeal, 1 cup of margarine, 1 cup of flour, and 1 teaspoon of baking soda. Use your hands to squish and squash the dough until you decide you're done. Roll into balls and place on cookie sheets. Bake at 320 degrees F for 8-10 minutes.