

## Preparing a Meal

### Introduction

Being able to prepare a meal is an important skill for a child to learn to become more independent. Adolescent children may be ready to learn to prepare easy meals for themselves. Teaching a child meal preparation will allow them to care for themselves at home and to spend time away from their caregiver if need be, in preparation for living independently. Supervise your child until they are ready or capable to handle these tasks. Here are some tips to consider when teaching a child to prepare a meal.

**Plan an easy to prepare menu** – Think of menu items that your child likes and are easy to prepare such as pancakes. Canned or pre-washed and cut vegetables, healthy frozen meals, fruit, dry snacks are all great options to work with. If you do not feel that your child can handle a hot stove and pan safely, you can avoid having them cook on a stove and think of options like sandwiches, salads, or those that use pre-cooked meals that can be heated in a microwave, or can be used straight out of the refrigerator.

**Buy pre-prepared foods, meat, protein, fruit and vegetables** – You can take your child shopping with you to the grocery store to pick out foods that they like. You should show your child where they can find pre-prepared foods, deli meats, cooked whole chicken, frozen or canned foods, breads and more. If your child can safely manage to cut, chop and cook foods, you can pick out items that need more preparation.

**Teach kitchen safety** – As you teach your child to prepare meals, you should spend some time on kitchen safety. Here are some topics that you should address about kitchen safety with your child:

1. **Hygiene** – Show them how to wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly. Teach them about washing their hands and all surfaces after handling raw meats or eggs.
2. **Handling hot food** – teach them to safely operate a stove if this is something you want them to do, and know they are capable of doing. Regularly demonstrate how to safely remove hot food from the microwave.
3. **Safety tools** – There are many tools you can use to prepare meals safely. For example, using a simple kitchen timer can help reduce the chance that food will burn or cause a fire. Other safety items include potholders or silicon gloves to move hot pans or food, protective mittens to cut and chop food safely.
4. **Using a microwave safely** – You will need to teach your child how to use a microwave safely. This includes explaining what types of containers can go in the microwave, how to choose a container to avoid overflow and teaching them how to read microwave instructions on containers.
5. **Other safety tips** – Teach your child how to keep clothes and jewelry from catching fire. Keep a fire extinguisher readily available and show them what to do in an emergency. You can create a visual guide for this.

**Use visual recipes/schedules** – Once your child is comfortable in the kitchen, you can create visual recipes or schedules to make it easy for them to prepare a meal. For example, you can create a visual recipe for making a sandwich. This is a great way to create nutritious meal options for your child. Take pictures while you prepare a meal and print out the different steps in the process to create your own visual recipe for your child. You can also use visuals to teach your child about nutrition, and choosing healthy ingredients. This can include pictures of opening the refrigerator, taking out the deli meat, making a sandwich and putting everything back in the fridge.

**Practice** – Spend time practicing meal preparation with your child. Pay special attention to safety, hygiene and nutrition. You can use prompting until your child can do all the steps required in meal preparation. Do not leave your child alone to prepare a meal until you are sure they can safely handle themselves in the kitchen.

**Use pre-prepared meal delivery services** – There are many companies that now offer pre-prepared ingredients with easy to follow recipes for meal preparation. The idea is to send the recipient a “meal in a box”. The ingredients are pre measured, and may even be pre-washed and cut, which eliminates a lot of the work that one would need to do to prepare a gourmet meal. If this is something your child is interested in trying, you can try a variety of these services to find something that your child likes and is comfortable with.

**Build upon basic skills** – Once your child understands how to make a basic recipe, you can build upon basic kitchen skills. For example, if you have taught your child how to make a stir-fry, once they are comfortable with this, you can teach them how to open a can of mandarin oranges and add it to the stir-fry. You can also add additional or different steps to many dishes. For example, you can substitute nachos for burritos in the same basic recipe. It's a great idea to create your own Recipe Book for your child with a selection of their favorite, easy to prepare meals.

**Don't forget clean-up** – Do show your child how to clean up after themselves. This includes washing utensils, putting unused food away, loading the dishwasher and cleaning counters. You can teach clean up skills, one step at a time until your child is able to completely clean up after themselves.

**Conclusion** – Allowing your child to prepare their own meals will give them a sense of independence and confidence. As you experiment with what works best for your child, remember to always supervise them until they are fully capable of working safely in the kitchen. Make note of any safety tips that you may need to reinforce. Meal prep is a skill that may take time to develop, and depends on your child's interest in working in the kitchen. Frequent praise and encouragement will go a long way in helping them develop this important life skill. We hope you have found this information useful. You can find additional resources on our website, [www.porchlighteducation.org](http://www.porchlighteducation.org).