

## Children cooking: How young can they be?

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Preschoolers with Knives

How young can a child be and still learn how to cook?



Illustration by Rob Donnelly.

If this article ends abruptly, it is because the child welfare authorities are at the door: A preschooler in our house is chopping carrots.

A few weeks ago in the *New York Times*, a mother wrote about how her sons, ages 10 and 14, each cook dinner one night a week. It was a lovely story, but instead of reading it and thinking, OK—only seven more years, I thought, I can do better than that.

My son may be only 3, and barely 3, but he already wants to cook dinner. There's a surprising amount he can accomplish in the kitchen: wash vegetables, destem mushrooms, crack eggs, knead dough, consume enormous quantities of said dough. But he wants to do more. This is logical: The kitchen is where we spend the most time, and like any child, he can sense what his parents are excited about. He wants to cook because we care about cooking. I want him to cook for the same reason. I'm not pushing him; he's pushing himself.

I'm not talking about the saffron-foaming, *Iron Chef* sort of kids' cooking. When I need help in the kitchen, it is rarely because the saffron needs foaming. I'm talking about the actual work of getting dinner on the table.

You are cringing. I can see you cringing from here. You are thinking: This is a very, very bad idea.

But wait: I can cite a famous dead academic! The great, tubercular Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed the concept of "a zone of proximal development," for the work a child is not quite able to do on his own. With the guidance of someone more skilled, though, he soon can. With the exception of the oven, and a lot of the stove, much of cooking amounts to a zone of proximal development, even for a preschooler.

What's surprising, or at least surprising to some of us, is how few people have treated it this way. Advice about what children can do in the kitchen usually devolves into advice about what they can't do. It answers only questions that no parent would ask: "According to the University of Illinois, deep fryers are highly dangerous and children should not be in the kitchen when deep fryers are in use."

Almost no one has a good answer to the question of when children can make a real contribution in the kitchen—the actual work of getting dinner on the table. Instead, cookbooks for children seem to treat the eighth birthday as endowing some sort of mystical kitchen capabilities. But Mollie Katzen's cookbooks for preschoolers, *Pretend Soup* and *Salad People*, are works of child-friendly genius: Each recipe is given in pictorial format, scaled down for little hands, not dumbed down. Katzen discovered that preschoolers were more than capable of actual cooking. Entrusted with the responsibility of being in the kitchen, they act as if granted a precious privilege.

This takes enormous patience on the adult's part, of course, but even very young children can learn apparently grown-up tasks. Food writer Amanda Hesser taught her preschool-age twins how to dip-and-sweep—the proper way to measure flour. "It's a little more challenging as they have to do several things at once, including neatly scraping away the excess flour," she wrote in an email. "But I figured this challenge would appeal to them."

The most significant problem Mollie Katzen had cooking with preschoolers was that they took their work too seriously. Instead of smashing the egg to bits, they wouldn't crack it hard enough. When something spilled, they were crestfallen. "You have to spend a lot of time telling them that it is OK that they spilled," she says.

There's the problem of the stove, of course, but that isn't insurmountable: Many people, including Mollie Katzen, swear by electric skillet for children (with supervision), often starting at age 4.

The bigger problem is also sharper: You can only do so much prep work with a serrated butter knife. Not everything has the texture of a strawberry.

You're cringing again. You are not alone. When someone on Chowhound posted a question about an appropriate knife for a 4-year-old, it didn't take long before the blowback began: "Are you freaking kidding me?" Someone else soon chimed in with the opinion that a child isn't "ready to grasp the potential of a (sharp) knife to cause disaster until they're about 9 or 10."

But that's not true—the Efe, in the Congolese rainforest, famously teach toddlers to use machetes. This isn't really about motor skills. It's about cultural assumptions. For us non-Efe parents, knives pose a paradox: the duller, the more dangerous. For the recipes in *Honest Pretzels*, her cookbook for older children, Katzen recommends a very sharp 3-inch paring knife. There are now child-safe knives that are made duller; like training diapers that are less absorbent, they are intentionally worse at being what they are. But a dull knife that looks more like a sharp knife seems like a hopelessly confused message.

You can exhale: I do not think Isaiah's ready for any sort of knife. But there are other options. There's a subset of American parents who let their children do things that other parents might consider flat-out negligent: Montessori disciples. Because of the importance of "practical life skills" in Montessori, children are supposed to be in the kitchen. It's a glorious thing to discover: There is a secret underground of parents for whom the social pressure is not to be paranoid.

And there are Montessori websites that sell child-appropriate kitchen items—not toys, but tools. So we ordered a few—a vegetable peeler, a grater and juicer, a two-handed chopper—ignoring the 4-and-up age suggestions. After all, what's the worst that could happen?

Right: that. It didn't. Everyone in the household still has all their cuticles. The apples and carrots were thoroughly chopped. They were decimated, actually. For the moment, though, the tools are safe only under supervision. The problem isn't his physical maturity. The problem is that he's too sure he won't hurt himself. This is a problem created by supervision, of course: He's sure he won't hurt himself because he's never hurt himself. By the time he's 4, I'd be surprised if he wasn't chopping apples and nuts for the salad or peeling carrots for roasting.

After that? Well, I wouldn't mind a Momofuku sous vide egg every morning. You could argue with a straight face that a sous vide water bath is the most child-friendly cooking technique: The temperatures are low. You can't burn yourself. The nutrients don't dissipate. The British chef Heston Blumenthal once cooked a whole pig sous vide in a hot tub, which makes it sound relaxing—we could use it in place of time outs.

We're just waiting for the Montessori catalog to stock the hot tub.