

10 SKILLS EVERY TODDLER NEEDS *in the kitchen*



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While it may seem like a recipe for chaos - or at the very least a real mess - it remains true that:

TODDLERS BELONG IN THE KITCHEN

Why It Matters Toddlers are natural learners and explorers. When we invite them into the kitchen, we're not just teaching them how to stir or spread peanut butter—we're helping them develop fine motor skills, independence, and a positive relationship with food. Early exposure to cooking sets the foundation for life skills that go far beyond making a sandwich.

In this Guide: I share 10 simple, safe, skills you can teach your toddler, starting today!

INTRODUCTION

READY, SET ...





#1.

HANDWASHING

Before we even think about cooking, the very first lesson in the kitchen is handwashing. And not just a quick rinse under the faucet. I'm talking a real, get-in-there-and-get-that-dirt-out scrubbing.

In case it's been a hot second since you had to teach someone how to wash their hands, here's how to do it:

- Turn on warm water.
- Use soap (bubbles make everything more fun!).
- Scrub for 20 seconds. That's the ABCs or "Happy Birthday" sung twice.
- Rinse well and dry on a clean towel.

PRO TIP:

Not interested in putting your inner Taylor on display? I get it. Instead pick a washing song and make that part of your "cooking with my kids" routine!



POURING & STIRRING

One of the easiest and most exciting things toddlers can do in the kitchen is pouring and stirring. And yes, it will be messy. But this is where they really start learning coordination and feeling like they're actually helping.

Ways to let them participate:

- Give them a small measuring cup and let them pour dry ingredients like flour or sugar into a bowl.
- For stirring, use a big bowl with high sides to prevent spills.
- Hold their hand gently and show them how to mix slowly in a circle.

HOT TIP:

Really not ready for the mess? Let them 'stir' in a dry bowl first, just to get the feel of it, before adding real ingredients!



#3.

CUTTING

Yes, even toddlers can start ‘chopping’! Obviously, we’re not handing over the butcher’s knife just yet. Instead, start with plastic or serrated kid-safe knives and soft foods like bananas, beets, cheese sticks, or even cucumbers.

But, as always, safety first!

- Show them how to hold food steady with one hand and cut with the other.
- Teach them slow, gentle sawing motions instead of pressing down hard.
- Stay close. This is a ‘parents are hands-on’ skill at first!

HOT TIP:

Check out the Resources page for some of my favorite kid safe knives!



#4.

SPREADING & ASSEMBLING

Kids love playing with their food, right, so let's channel that energy into something useful, like spreading and assembling!

Ideas for how:

- Give them a dull butter knife and let them spread peanut butter, hummus, softened butter, or cream cheese on toast.
- Let them assemble their own mini sandwiches or add cheese to crackers.
- Teach the 'gentle press'—don't smash the sandwich, just "close it softly!"

PRO TIP:

Bread is sensitive, so start with toast which can withstand the pressure that little kids place when first learning to spread.



#5.

TEARING & PEELING

One of the safest ways to introduce kids to kitchen prep is by letting them use their hands. Tearing and peeling are simple but important skills.

Easy ways to make this happen:

- Let them tear lettuce for salads or sandwiches.
- Have them peel bananas or start (or finish) an orange peel.
- For slightly older toddlers, introduce a safe veggie peeler with supervision.

Here's another great way you can involve them - especially when you have a need for a messy pile of herbs (pesto, anyone?). With basil, mint, and parsley, let your toddler 'tear' the leaves into tiny pieces or just tear them off the stems. It's great fine motor practice and it doesn't matter what the leaves end up looking like at the end!

SIMPLE PESTO

Add ½ cup pine nuts, 2 Tbs lemon juice, 1 clove garlic, ¼ tsp salt, 2 cups basil leaves ¼ cup olive oil, and ¼ cup parmesan cheese in a food processor and pulse until combined. Toss with warm pasta. Enjoy!



#6.

MEASURING

Cooking is basically a hands-on math lesson, and kids love to measure and pour.

So make cooking a game!

- Count out scoops of flour or teaspoons of sugar together.
- Teach big vs. small by showing them the difference between tablespoons and teaspoons.
- Let them help level off dry ingredients with the back of a butter knife.

This even works if you're cooking by weight. Let them tell you when you've hit the right gram or oz weight for all your ingredients.

Also, if you're still really not into screwing up your recipes by letting a kid get involved, let your kids practice measuring, scooping, and pouring with something else. For about a year, we had a tub of rice with kitchen tools that the kids could use to pretend cook.

PRO TIP

If you give your kids a tub of rice or dried beans for measuring, scooping, and pouring put down a sheet first for easy cleanup.



CRACKING (EGGS)

Okay, cracking eggs is a bit advanced, but if you start early, kids get the hang of it fast.

- Show them how to tap the egg gently on the counter, or the bowl.
- Teach them to use both thumbs to gently open it apart.
- Next level: show them how to separate white from yolk

PRO TIP

Have your kiddos crack their eggs into a small bowl first, before they're added to your actual ingredient in case there's a rogue eggshell. And trust me, there will be rogue eggshells in the beginning.



#8.

SPRINKLING

Help your toddlers see the joy of a dish “coming together” by letting them be the ones to add the final touch - whether it’s sprinkling cheese, herbs, or a pinch of salt.

- Let them sprinkle shredded cheese on top of pasta or pizza.
- Give them a pinch of salt and let them practice evenly distributing it.
- Hand them fresh herbs and let them ‘decorate’ plates with a few leaves.
- Let them actually sprinkle sprinkles on a cake or cookies.

JUST FOR FUN

Challenge them to make a design with sprinkles or herbs. Show them that there isn’t a right or wrong way, and let their creativity (and mess!) shine through.



#9.

CLEANING UP

Cleaning up is just as important as cooking, and kids, especially toddlers (not so much for my teens, although they do it anyway) love to help.

Not sure how? Try:

- Let them 'wash' plastic bowls in the sink with warm, soapy water.
- Give them a small damp cloth to wipe their work area (or *any* area).
- Have a 'clean-up countdown' and see how fast they can put utensils away.

PRO TIP

Just like for handwashing, choose a pick-up song that you play after cooking. By the time it's over, their area should be clean. (Or clean-ish.)



#10.

TASTING

This might be the most important lesson of all—teaching kids to enjoy food and describe what they taste. If you've been listening to me at all over the last few months, you might want to roll your eyes at this one.

"Ok, we get it. Enough already ... Yes, yes. TALK to your kids about the food they're eating. You sound like a broken record."

But hear me out. Talking to our kids about food is SUPER important for their comfort in actually trying new things. Plus, it builds their vocabulary. {So it's win- win!} How can you do this? Start by downloading [this free PDF](#) with descriptive terms you can use at mealtime and then do this:

- Ask open-ended questions: "What does this taste like? Is it sweet, salty, crunchy, soft?"
- Encourage curiosity: "Does this remind you of something else you've eaten?"
- Let them describe flavors without pressure—even if they don't like something!

PRO TIP

My kids have a more refined palette than I do, and I like to encourage their curiosity by asking them to identify mystery ingredients I add to meals.



RESOURCES

General Resources

Toddler Tower: <https://piccalio.com/products/mini-chef-convertible-helper-tower>

Prep Set: <https://www.planetbox.com/products/prep-to-pack-three-piece-prep-set>

Full Set - Cooking & Baking: <https://www.weesprout.com/products/little-chef-kids-cooking-and-baking-set>

Kid Safe Knives - Page 7

Kiddicutter: <https://kiddikutter.com.au/product-category/kiddikutter-knife-shop/>

Nylon Serrated Knife: <https://www.montessoriservices.com/kids-nylon-knife-set>

Wavy Cutter: <https://www.montessoriservices.com/practical-life/food-preparation/cutting-slicing/wavy-chopper>

Wooden Knives: <https://piccalio.com/products/mini-cutter-wooden-knife-for-children>

Cleaning Tools - Page 9

West Elm: <https://www.westelm.com/products/wooden-cleaning-play-set>

For Small Hands, Indoor Clean-Up: <https://www.forsmallhands.com/cleaning-up/indoor-clean-up>



WHAT'S NEXT?



Thank you!

Cooking with kids won't *always* be fun, but it can be, especially if you give it time.

For more tips and support visit my blog, check out my videos, and join our community of like-minded individuals.



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