

CRUNCH BITES PODCAST

BITE SIZED CHILDREN'S NUTRITION INFO

Season 2 Episode 1: Cooking with kids

Mikala: Hello, and welcome to Crunch Bites, a podcast for parents where we discuss all things children's nutrition and inspire you to build those healthy habits in the home. Join us as we chat about picky eating, reaching for rainbow foods, packing school lunches that actually get eaten, and so much more. Brought to you by Crunch and Sip and presented by Qualified Nutritionists. This podcast is packed with goodness and full of fresh ideas. Hi, everyone. I'm Mikala.

Nicole: And I'm Nicole.

Mikala: And we're the hosts of Crunch Bites.

Nicole: So welcome. Today, we're coming to you from Whadjuk Noongar Budja, and I would like to take a moment to recognise the traditional custodians of the land, the Whadjuk people, and recognise their deep connection to these beautiful lands and the wisdom that lives through their culture.

Mikala: Thanks, Nic. Today's episode is brought to you by avocados. Avocados are a brilliant veggie slash fruit that are easy for kids to get their hands on when they're trying to learn how to make things in the kitchen. They're one of those veggies that when they're cheap, like they are at the moment, they're great to stock up on. And just remembering to always buy a range of really hard ones through to soft and ready to go so that as you need them across the week, they're ripe and ready for you.

Nicole: Yeah, avocados are a really great one, aren't they? So, today's episode, we are talking about cooking with kids. It is an activity that can be super fun, it can be messy, and it can require quite a lot of patience. So, what we'll talk about today is some of the benefits that comes with cooking with kids and getting them in the kitchen, the different types and stages of involvement that can be related to their age and their development. And then we'll share with you some of our favourite recipes that you can try at home when you're cooking with the kids. So, let's start by talking about what are some of the benefits of getting kids involved in the kitchen?

Mikala: Yeah, look, there's lots of fabulous benefits when it comes to getting kids involved in the kitchen, for sure. And I'm really excited about jumping into this topic today because certainly my own experience of getting my kids in the kitchen has been so positive. And I can see now that they're the ones who step in and make all that lovely food just as much as we do. And so much of that has come from that lovely, shared experience in the space. So, I mean, when we look at the benefits, they're just endless. But really, it's that positive

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experience and exposure to a variety of foods. It's lots of great opportunities for building those healthy habits, for developing and refining kids' motor skills, even for practising some literacy and some numeracy. And obviously then all those lovely opportunities for communication and bonding and the relationship that you develop and grow while being in the space together and creating that lovely food.

Nicole: There are truly so many amazing benefits from cooking with kids. So, I do want to expand on a couple of these examples that you've just mentioned. So, let's start with food exposure and healthy habits first. So, food exposure is when kids get to look, feel and smell new foods and become familiar with these foods. So, Mikala, how does this feed into the conversation of benefits when cooking with kids?

Mikala: Yeah, so food exposure is a really important part of that whole journey, but we're often so fixed on the actual eating and the tasting of food that we forget that it's all those other senses that feed into the experience as well. And that's like you said, the seeing, the smelling, the touching. And, you know, in children actually becoming more comfortable and more interested and more inclined to have a varied and healthy diet, that it comes from being able to get in touch with all of those senses through that exposure. And there was a really interesting study that was actually done in 2020 that found that children who regularly participate in family cooking then tended to eat more fruit and vegetables than children who just weren't or who were rarely in the kitchen and involved in that cooking process. So, it really just enforces what we're saying here, which is that having them in the space, learning and developing an interest in foods means that they're more likely to feel proud of what they're creating and more inclined to want to actually eat it at the end. And you also have the benefit of teaching kids that as a family, you have some control over how much sugar, fat or salt you're adding into the foods that you're eating. You have control over the portion size, you know, for example, spooning a little mini muffin into the muffin tray rather than, you know, the gigantic ones that you get if you're actually buying over the counter. So essentially, you know, the whole hands on process is what really reinforces those healthy habits for our kids.

Nicole: Yeah, that's exactly right. So, you mentioned just before food preparation skills, which tie perfectly into that motor skill development. So, let's expand on this one a little bit more.

Mikala: Yeah, so those food preparation skills are so essential generally for anyone, you know, to be able to jump in the kitchen and create yummy, healthy food, you have to feel competent. And when it comes to kids that, you know, can start with anything from simply spreading, say, for example, some hummus on some crackers, you know, through to starting to chop or stir or peel or grate, all those processes that require us to actually use our hand eye coordination and and start to develop those fine motor skills. They're skills that require confidence and a sense of ability that you just simply not born with that you actually have to learn.

Nicole: Yeah, that's exactly right. It definitely requires a lot of patience, and it can be a longer process. Some kids might move through that process quicker, and some might be a bit slower. But the more patience you bring to this journey, the more you'll see that you're helping build some confident little cooks.

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Mikala: Yeah, and I actually think that's a really important point that we need to emphasise here is that along the way you have to accept the imperfections, you have to accept the overly thick slices of cheese or the roughly grated carrot, the chunks in the bowl or the, you know, whisked egg where half of it ends up splashing out the sides. You have to accept all these little steps along the way and celebrate them because they will improve, but it's not going to happen overnight. And so it's so important that patience comes into play because, you know, as a parent, if you're overly critical or you struggle with that imperfection or that learning journey, then kids can feel really self-conscious about the fact that they're not as competent as you, but they're standing alongside someone who's had years in the kitchen and also someone who had to start somewhere. So, they need to feel like they're doing a good job. And really, it's your job to make sure that that's how they feel. Obviously, within reason, if they're being reckless or dangerous or they break something, then obviously feedback is needed. But it's great if you can bring in as much patience as possible to that space so that it's a really enjoyable process for everyone.

Nicole: Yeah, I think we all struggle a little bit with letting go of that perfection and control, but it's definitely a really valuable thing to keep in mind when we are cooking with kids. So, if we're in the kitchen following a recipe, what are some of the skills that kids can be taking away from this process?

Mikala: Well, this is a great one, because when you're following a recipe, you're obviously bringing lots of literacy and numeracy skills into play. You know, something like reading the methods or counting the ratios or measuring the quantities. You've even got some really lovely experimental science-based learning that comes in as well. But the beauty of a recipe is it's not, you know, it's asking kids to use those skills in a way that's weaved in and relatable and it's not pressurised like a classroom can be. You know, and it's things like working out, OK, well, we need a third of a cup. How many thirds go into a full cup? So, all of those kinds of conversations or questions that you can be posing or having with them while they're following the recipe and helping them with that conversion, they help them understand the breakdown and the application of those skills, which, you know, just has endless benefits. Even that's something as simple as talking to them about what's happening when water is boiling on the stove and creating steam. So, you can have a lovely chat about evaporation. There's just so many lovely elements of learning that can be weaved in there and it's very organic and it just kind of comes along for the ride with them.

Nicole: Yeah, that's exactly right. There are so many incidental benefits of reading those recipes and interpreting them. So, as you mentioned, working through recipes and talking about what might be happening in that process is that kind of one form of communication that's around that learning communication. But cooking with kids also allows for a more deeper personal level of communication, which is a really beautiful space for this.

Mikala: Yeah, it is definitely the case. It's such a rich part of cooking together, getting kids in the kitchen. And, you know, that communication, like you said, it covers the sharing of knowledge and the learning. It also covers the sharing of the space and then also the sharing of conversation and the strengthening of bond between people when they're cooking together. But in terms of that shared knowledge, I think it's one of the most significant

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benefits of cooking. And it's historically, you know, very normal practice that all those food traditions are a part of cultural identity and they're passed on when cooking together. And then on that really organic person to person level is the communication that's going on between the people who are actually in the kitchen. So, there's the sharing of the space, you know, there's the sharing of the food, there's if you've got multiple kids, the cooperation and actually allowing different tasks to be handed out and then working together. And then even further in terms of bonding through conversation that's going on in the kitchen, there is so much potential for kids to really open up and start talking about what's on their mind. And that might be something that happened at school yesterday or a topic that they're struggling with in the classroom. If their bodies are busy, sometimes their mind has a really nice opportunity to relax and unwind and just speak. And this can feel more safe and less vulnerable than a direct question or sustained eye contact, especially when you're dealing with young boys. You know, on so many levels, the communication benefits of being in the kitchen are really quite profound.

Nicole: Yeah, I think it's definitely one of the beauties of cooking. So, we've already referred to a few different ways that we can get kids in the kitchen. But let's talk about this topic a little bit more. So what ways can we involve kids in cooking?

Mikala: Well, I think it all starts simply with watching. And, you know, just that lovely image of a little kid pulling a stool up alongside you and just watching what you're doing, you know, because sometimes to begin with, that's all they might want to do is just observe. And that's completely fine. And then from there, you know, kids can start actually touching and assembling. You know, there might be multiple parts that they're putting together, like if you've chopped up a whole range of veggies and they can assemble them on the plate in a in a pattern or, you know, in a rainbow or even like, you know, making the shape of a lion's face or something kind of fun. But basically just helping with the assembly part of the food rather than the processing and preparing. And then, you know, from there, obviously moving into more processing and preparing. But, yeah, the ultimate goal at the end of the day is helping them develop that autonomy in the kitchen, which is such a journey. And, you know, starting all the way from prepping alongside you through to choosing, you know, what they're going to do, how they're going to do it, taking the lead, making some of those bigger decisions. As parents, we're there to support and share that journey and eventually step back and allow them to just be in charge.

Nicole: Yeah, exactly right. And you've just mentioned that kids are involved in this journey, so we obviously can't expect them to just jump in straight away and cook a three-course meal straight up. So, they will need to start at the beginning and build their skills and confidence, which may depend on their age and developmental stage. So, shall we go through and talk about this a little bit more? So, talking about some different ways kids can get involved, depending on their age or their developmental stage.

Mikala: Yeah, definitely. I think probably starting off just by saying, though, that remember that all our advice is general and that you know your child best. So sometimes they may be more or less competent than what we outline here. But generally, it's important to keep in mind that when kids are starting off, we want to keep them safe. So, keeping their roles and responsibilities more simple and a little bit less exposure to things like sharp knives is

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obviously a good starting point. But yeah, if we start with that sort of two to five age range, there's so many tasks that they can be doing that are all really lovely and safe. They'll depend on how confident your child is. But, you know, things like washing the fruit and veg in the sink or handing your ingredients as you need them, things like tearing up lettuce leaves or cabbage leaves, stirring or mixing cold foods, spooning a batter into a muffin tray if you're prepared to deal with the fact that they may miss. And then maybe something like putting all the toppings on a pizza. They're the kind of activities that they can be doing here. And you can kind of lead and guide. But they're all really safe and manageable. So, they can sort of explore it as well, which is really lovely. And then between sort of five and seven, they start to have a little bit more ability to employ those motor skills that we talked about. So, you know, there's a bit more control. They could be spreading things, whisking things, kneading a dough, mashing some hot food, maybe peeling or grating some veggies that are a little bit harder and then cutting into maybe some soft foods with a nice safe knife. And then from seven sort of to nine ages, they're more able to weigh up risk. So that's when we start looking at things like using the stove, cutting up some harder veggies with a knife that is a bit sharper, but is still safe and one that you would be supervising closely, taking charge with a bit of that recipe execution, which means that they could be weighing things on the scales or measuring quantities based on the recipe and maybe even helping you plan the meal or write a shopping list. And then nine onwards, it's similar. It's a lot of those similar tasks as to what they're doing between seven and nine, but they can start doing them with less and less supervision. So, there's a little bit more ability for them to make safe and sound decisions to weigh up the risks from what they've learned from the years previously and what they've been doing with you up until that point and to be a bit more independent as they kind of move around the kitchen. They can also start cleaning as they go and being responsible for dealing with the mess and the dishes. But yeah, what you're working towards is the point where they can be responsible for making a meal one night of the week or fully cleaning the kitchen after someone else has cooked a meal, you know, for sorting out their own meals on the weekend. And obviously each family is different as to when this might kick in. And I think a lot of the literature says heading into teen years, they could definitely be starting to make something quite simple to go on the family table. And, you know, I could say from my own experience, it's my favourite night of the week is when my kids make a meal or completely clean the kitchen and I can just, you know, sit back and be served, which is, which is quite a delight.

Nicole: It does sound lovely. So what you're saying is you can get them in sooner so you can sit back and relax sooner.

Mikala: Exactly. That is exactly what I'm saying, Nicole.

Nicole: So that was a really good summary of the different ways we can get kids involved depending on their developmental stage and their ages and really letting their confidence and their skills guide that process. So, it is very much a learning process and it does require a lot of patience as well as a lot of other things. What are some of the other things that we can keep in mind or some tips we can provide parents who are wanting to get their kids more involved in the kitchen?

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Mikala: Yeah, look, you're absolutely right. I think you have to have patience. That is first and foremost, and it kind of informs everything that we would advise when it comes to cooking with kids in the kitchen. You have to accept that it's going to take longer. You know, you've got to accept it's going to be messier. It's not going to be a perfect result, but it will be this lovely, creative and experimental journey for them and a space for learning and for connecting with you and for adopting new skills. And adding to this, it's always really important, I think, to practise good food safety and to talk about food hygiene. So that does need to be addressed when you're cooking with kids in the kitchen. We need to talk to them about washing their hands before they start preparing food, about washing their hands thoroughly if they've touched raw meats, about the importance of washing utensils and shopping boards if they've been used to prepare a food that we know requires cooking before it is safe to eat. So, there is a conversation there that's really important and does need to be had in a serious manner, but obviously in and amongst all the other parts which are more relaxed because having fun is the ultimate goal. At the end of the day, we want them to have a lovely, enjoyable experience and want to come back into the kitchen. If they walk away feeling like it was really fun and they did a good job and they'd like to do it again, then that's what they'll choose to do. Probably also another important point is be mindful of the recipes that you choose, you know, or the ambition that you have, because we do need to keep it really simple when they are younger, keep it short when their attention span is not long enough to see a recipe from way to go. You need to start small and build as they become more interested and become more competent. And really don't don't get your kids in the kitchen if you're under pressure or you don't have a lot of time because that is a recipe for disaster. Make sure that you as a parent choose the moments where the unfolding of whatever it is ends up, whatever it ends up being is fine and you don't feel stressed or flustered and you don't walk away feeling like you haven't done a great job or they don't walk away feeling like they haven't done a great job. You know that timing is extremely important when it comes to jumping in and having those lovely experiences. And I think it's it's fine to, if not better, to say no to cooking together. If that's a better pathway, then then doing it under pressure or falling apart. And then finally, just remember to create lovely foods that are very vibrant and ask for lots of different colours, bring in the veggies wherever you can, because remember that we want to be showing kids that making healthy food in the home is really possible and tastes great.

Nicole: Yeah, I think there's some really important points there. Often, we'll say or suggest cooking with kids might be a holiday or a weekend activity when you do have that time to allow that exploration and fun and some mistakes to happen. So, you also mentioned talking about keeping those foods fun and colourful to help maintain that attention. So, we've actually got this really great recipe that we've promoted a few times on our social media, which we'll make sure we include the link in our show notes. But it's called Unicorn Noodles and it's just this really fun recipe and activity that you can do with kids at home. So, you get some red cabbage, start boiling it on the stove, put some rice noodles inside the pot. They will change a nice, bright purple colour. So, we drain them and put them in a bowl and then to add some even more fun, get some lemon or lime juice and squeeze that over the top and they'll turn this beautiful, vibrant pink colour. And so that can be a really fun activity to do with kids. And the colour from the cabbage actually works as a bit of an acid indicator. So, a little bit of science weaved in there too.

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Mikala: Yeah, I love this activity and it certainly is a perfect school holidays one.

Nicole: So, building on this, what are some other great recipes that we can recommend parents can start with for their kids to get in the kitchen?

Mikala: Look, I think when it comes to starting off, just generally, I would say pick a one bowl wonder. Pick something that doesn't have lots of steps. Pick a recipe that is low mess, low fuss and really forgiving, you know, so that if too much milk or too much flour accidentally finds its way into the bowl, it doesn't matter. You can make it work. It's not going to make a big difference. That's probably my, you know, number one tip. Our website is definitely full of great recipes for families to follow. And if I were to pick a few, probably some of my faves would be our chocolate zucchini muffins. You know, for a few reasons, they're really delicious. They're packed full of veggies, but also grating zucchini is a fantastic starting point for a kid and grating because it's so nice and soft and it's easy to actually manoeuvre. And the other recipe that's a winner is probably the choose your own adventure muffins because they can be really creative and kids can feel like they've had, you know, a lovely bit of creative control, creative licence there with the final product. So, they really invested. And then probably finally the corn fritters, because they're really quick, they're easy, they're vibrant and colourful and they use canned foods, which is a great thing to show kids as well, that healthy food doesn't have to be fresh. It can also be canned and frozen. And it's a really nice way to show how simple it is to make a healthy snack after school or a really simple dinner for a grab and go option. But yeah, I would say jump on our website, have a look through. But they're probably some of my my top, top faves.

Nicole: Yeah, there's some really great recipes. I love those ones, too. So, we'll make sure we include some links to recipes in our show notes. It's also good to remember that if you don't have time to cook with kids from start to finish for a whole recipe, you can also just get them involved in one aspect of dinner. And that's still an exposure. That's still getting them used to that. But it's not kind of putting that added pressure of having them involved in that whole process.

Mikala: Yeah, exactly, because I think it's good to remember that it's all about those touch points, that it doesn't actually have to be measured by what's done at the very end or by what's achieved. It's just about getting involved and having some contact with the process.

Nicole: So, we hope that some of these ideas and recipes has inspired you to give it a go and cook with your kids in the kitchen. Remember that our website is full of a range of different recipes, which we'll make sure we include in the show notes with this episode. So, make sure you jump on and find something that you can cook up a storm with your household. And remember that whatever it is that you're making, there's always a way to share some of those tasks. And don't forget to enjoy the process and the quality time with your family. If you liked today's episode, please tell and share it with your friends. Share the episode on socials and make sure you hit that review button and give us a five stars.

Mikala: Thanks, everyone. We'll chat to you next time.

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