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Is your child ready to cook?

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By the time she was 5 years old, Jenny O'Neal of Lansing was proficient enough in the kitchen to prepare a simple meal of Goulash for her entire family, thanks to a strong tradition of cooking alongside her mom and grandma.

Now a mom herself, she has passed that tradition to her children and hopes to share it with other families, too.

As a 4-H educator with the Michigan State University Extension program in Eaton County, O'Neal hosted a weeklong cooking camp for kids in April designed to get children off the couch, out of the junk cupboards and into healthy eating habits.

More than 30 children ages 9 to 14 participated.

"We tried to teach the kids how to cook healthier so they will have confidence to know that they can go into the kitchen and peel some carrot sticks instead of grabbing a Twinkie," says O'Neal, whose 2-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter regularly help her prepare meals.

She's not alone in her efforts. Teaching children to cook is a popular weapon in the battle against childhood obesity, according to the Society of Nutrition Education. That's because children are more likely to try new things - including important fruits and veggies - if they had a hand in preparing the food.

"The more comfortable children are around food, the less likely they are to have food issues," says Teresa Wagner, a registered dietician and chairwoman of the pediatrics division of the Society of Nutrition Education.

Whether you have a toddler or a tween, experts say it's never too late to get your kids into the kitchen. Here are some things to consider

How old is your child?

Parents often overestimate how old a child should be before he can help out in the kitchen, O'Neal says. Children as young as 2 can be given simple tasks in the kitchen, like handing potatoes to Mom as she washes them.

"They are never too young," she says. "When my daughter was 18 months old, my sister had her in a high chair stirring muffin batter."

How mature is your child?

More important than age is maturity, says Denene Vincent, owner and executive chef of the Le Chat

Gourmet cooking school in Eaton Rapids. She hosts a monthly class for kids and is planning a weeklong camp July 7-11.

A hyper 10-year-old might not be able to handle a knife, but a focused 8-year-old might be able to, she says.

"You have to gauge each child individually," Vincent says. "And remember that kids have a small attention span. They get excited about something, start to do it and then want to move on to something else. Give them different things to do."

Has your child ever helped in the kitchen?

If your child has never helped out at mealtime, it's probably not a good idea to suddenly put him in charge of slicing veggies, even if he's 10 years old.

Instead, ease them into the process by introducing them to basic kitchen safety and then simple meal prep, Vincent advises.

How much time do you have?

Cooking with kids can be messy and can even add a few minutes to your normal prep time. But the experts agree the benefits far outweigh any hassles.

"You're teaching your children a life skill," Vincent says. "We all have to eat, and by learning to cook, they take ownership of their meals. They learn where food comes from."
