

Teach A Child to Cook and Help Him or Her for Life

Elizabeth Pivonka's son, 17, and daughter, 15, have told her that some of their friends "don't know how to boil water."

They are not kidding, she says: "They say their friends will stand in front of the pot and say 'How do you know when it's ready?'"

Pivonka has saved her own children from such a fate. The president of the Produce for Better Health Foundation had her kids peeling the tubers for their own beloved mashed potatoes by age 6 and using the stove independently by 13 or so.

But it's no surprise that many teens and young adults are clueless in the kitchen. "A lot of them grew up in really busy households, with people relying on frozen and fast foods and not doing a lot of cooking," says Maris Callahan, 26, a writer whose website, ingoodtasteblog.net, features recipes for novices.

Too many otherwise well-educated young people end up like many of her friends, she says, with refrigerators "that are empty except for some beer and takeout leftovers." It doesn't have to be that way. If you are the parent of a teen or a young adult living at home, you still have time to pass on one of life's most useful and rewarding skills.

Teaching your kids to cook is like teaching them to balance a checkbook or keep enough gas in the car, says Sandy Smith, a food writer and pastry chef in Saugerties, N.Y. "It's a survival skill."

It's a basic health tool, too, says Ed Bruske, a personal chef, kids' cooking teacher and food activist (blogging at theslowcook.com) in Washington, D.C. "When you cook, you learn about real food" that doesn't come in a box or through a take-out window, he says. "Anything you cook is bound to be healthier."

Kids who leave home as cooks also will save money, especially if they've also learned to shop for groceries and stick to a budget, Pivonka says.

But one of the best reasons for teaching teens to cook may be that it's a fun way to spend time together, Smith says. She says she and her daughter, 14, have always enjoyed baking together. But she got her son, Griffin, 16, in the kitchen just two years ago, after he became a vegetarian and she insisted he learn to make some of his own food.

He took up the challenge, and "it's been a way to connect with him that I wouldn't have had otherwise," Smith says. When friends come over and get drawn into the kitchen, "it's also a way to connect with his friends. And that's not always easy."

A few tips on how to cook up some lessons for your kids:

Learn together.

If your own skills are rusty, or you just want to learn something new, take some classes together.

Be safe.

Whether you are starting with a 6- or 16-year-old, teach safety first. Knife skills are key (and a teen should be ready to use a real chef's knife, Bruske says). So is hand-washing, knowing how to handle raw meat and knowing why real chefs always wear shoes (think of those knives).

Teach the language of recipes.

"Kids may not know what it means to 'saut spinach' or 'blanch the broccoli ' or even 'peel a potato,' " Pivonka says.

Arm them with a few crowd-pleasing favorites.

"They can dazzle their friends with a real macaroni-and-cheese," Bruske says.

Teach clean-up skills, too.

It will make them better roommates someday. "They don't love it," Smith says, but it reinforces the lesson that cooking isn't just about pleasing yourself, "it's also about doing things for others."

Smith suggests one other practical reason to teach kids to cook: "If you know how to cook, you can always find a job."