

Stovetop savvy

In a world dominated by schedules and passivity, I see more and more signs of young children unable or uncomfortable with tackling tasks without adult supervision. Given an open afternoon, their first instinct is to turn to us adults and ask “what can I do?”

I’ve noticed this response in my own kids, and you probably know what I mean. It may be the blank stare when you suggest to a school-age child that she busy herself with something that doesn’t involve a screen, or the sighs of boredom that erupt if there’s no planned peer activity on a given day. I’m sympathetic to their plight because we’ve all created this monster to some extent. So in my home, we’ve spent time this summer rediscovering some of the magic of family time, and ironically, my kids have become more independent.

Like so many meaningful aspects of life, it began with food. Let me begin by confessing that I’m not much of a cook, at least not a natural one. But I can follow a recipe and I’m willing to experiment. My preteen boys’ appetites are on the rise, and quite frankly I was getting tired of making the same basic entrees week after week. Yet, whenever I branched into new culinary territory, my efforts were too often greeted by scrunched up noses and groans (and this is before even tasting it!) When my kids balked at signing up for any camps or other organized activities this summer (good for them!), I decided that a free-wheeling summer would afford us more time to learn new skills together. My not-so-secret agendas were present as well: first, expanding the palate of my picky eater, and second, getting some assistance with household tasks, so I could get some work done at home.

In my usual sneaky manner, I won them over by starting with kid-friendly recipes. So chocolate chip pancakes quickly became a specialty. We looked through cookbooks like Emeril Lagasse’s *There’s a Chef in My Soup* for mouth-watering, healthier choices. Since I’m a big Rachel Ray fan, we got a few of her books and took turns voting on our next stovetop attempt. We’ve even spent some time together watching cooking shows on cable. After a couple of weeks, I was kicking myself for not having engaged them in mealtime more regularly at an earlier age.

The model of democracy held during our sessions. We took turns doing the cutting or the sautéing or table setting. I watched the boys cooperate and discover the most basic rules of cooking: butter burns if the heat is up too high, stirring until you see bubbles leads to fluffier omelet’s, and the importance of keeping staple ingredients in the pantry, I got a charge out of watching them practice skills they’ve learned in health class, like reading ingredient labels or composing meals that contained the new food pyramid requirements. In the process, we made other discoveries about one another; my picky eater, for example, loves to smell and make foods, even if he won’t try the final product. (He’s a semi-vegetarian, so I don’t force him to eat the meat entrees.) My other son prefers washing dishes to doing laundry (a godsend for me). My husband, a bona fide red meat eater, ate a turkey burger without realizing it, so skillfully did we disguise the meat with savory spices.

Once we started getting the hang of it, I also noticed a change in my “kitchen parenting” style. I began to hover less, to let them make their own decisions about which pan to use, which utensil worked best and even the choice of the meal. Why not take advantage of fresh veggies and have omelettes for dinner?

They began to appreciate and maintain my system of kitchen organization, emptying the dishwasher and actually putting items back in the right drawer or cabinet. They became conscious of how messy cooking can be, so they learned to “clean as you go.” I’m proud to say they now know enough to tell me when they’ve used the last of an ingredient, so I can restock at the grocery store for next time.

These seeds of responsibility go beyond learning their way around the kitchen. I can see the sense of self-confidence when they know how to do something their older cousin, for instance, cannot. They enjoy eating what they’ve cooked and are more conscious about not wasting food; after all, that would be an insult to all the effort they put into it the meal! They’ve learned to tackle cooking in all its steps of preparation, cooking and clean-up. And best of all, I can sit back and write while they accomplish these tasks.

Oops.....I’ve got to go; the chocolate chip pancakes are ready. Yum!

Maureen O’Brien, PhD is a developmental psychologist and mother of twins who lives in Canton. She lectures and consults on child development and parenting issues and is the author of the parenting series, Watch Me Grow: I’m One-Two-Three (available at Amazon.com).