



Cooking in a Hurry



To feed your child—and yourself—well, you must have family meals. However, given the fact that time and energy are in short supply for most parents, remember that good cooking doesn't have to take a lot of time. In fact, it can't, or you simply won't do it. Make yourself into a thinking cook, where you use your head instead of your time and effort. But first of all, adjust your *attitude*. Good nutrition matters, but attitudes toward food are all important. If family mealtimes are regular and enjoyable, your child will enjoy eating, he'll get what he needs, and he'll eat well for a lifetime.

Planning ahead is the key

Do some advance planning for your family meals. That helps when the crunch is on and everybody's hungry and you're tired and don't feel like cooking. Get things lined up for dinner the night before, while someone *else* does the dishes, so you don't have to tackle it when it's late and you're tired.

Your child can also get involved in preparing meals. If you think through your menus and teach him simple procedures, you'll find he can be a real help to you. You'll have fun together, and he'll be proud of himself.

Avoid common pitfalls in feeding children

Certain traps capture parents again and again and discourage them from making meals. *First*, catering—the feeling of having to please every eater with every food on the table. Instead, plan menus that combine liked and familiar foods with less popular foods, and make sure that there is at least one food on the table that each person *usually* eats. It's okay to be considerate. Plan menus that help your child be successful with the meal. Don't, however, cater to whims or short-order cook for him. *Second*, don't try to get food into your child. You only have control over getting a meal on the table and over keeping mealtimes pleasant. You do not have control over whether or not your child eats. *Third*, be realistic about your child's mealtime behavior. He may be erratic and inconsistent with eating. But even if he doesn't eat much, he needs to come to the table, be pleasant to be around, say “yes, please,” and “no, thank you,” and act his age with eating. *Fourth*, remember

how important you are. The idea of meals is to *eat with* your child, not just *feed* him. Keep mealtimes pleasant—keep the conversation light and positive, don't badger him about eating. *Finally*, avoid over- and under-hunger. To eat well and to be willing to learn to like new food, children need to come to the table hungry but not starved—they need predictable mealtimes and planned snacks between meals.

Look for shortcuts

Today's supermarket is a great help to the busy parent trying to get a meal on the table. Elizabeth Jackson, a registered dietitian and savvy cook, advises, “Use *convenient foods* rather than *convenience meals*.” There are many foods you can keep on hand to cut down on preparation time. Your home-cooked meals can be almost as quick—and probably more nutritious—than take-out fast food [see IS FAST FOOD GOOD FOOD?].

Here are some ideas to get you started. You probably won't earn a four-star rating, but the food will taste good and you'll be doing your part to get the family fed.

Grocery list: convenient foods

Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, & nuts:

Chicken thighs, boned chicken breasts or stir-fry; frozen fish fillets, canned tuna, or salmon; lean ground beef; boneless pork chops, cutlets, or stir-fry; small ham roasts and slices; stew meat (needs to be cooked slowly); breakfast steaks; prepared meat patties. Canned baked beans, cans or jars of precooked navy beans, garbanzos, black beans, refried beans. Eggs. Peanut butter. Low-fat or regular-fat luncheon meats, sausages, hot dogs.

Milk, yogurt, & cheese:

Preshredded cheese, cheese slices, cheese spread in jars. Milk to drink. Instant and prepared puddings and custards. Plain and flavored yogurt. Canned or dried cream soups reconstituted with milk.

Vegetables:

Frozen potatoes, instant mashed potatoes, boxed scalloped potato mix, canned or frozen vegetables,

fresh cleaned and chopped vegetables from the produce section, preshredded coleslaw mix, peeled tiny carrots, cleaned salad fixings by the pound. Vegetable juices, like tomato juice, vegetable juice cocktail. Flavored canned tomatoes, like Italian, Mexican, Cajun.

Fruits:

Fresh, canned, or frozen fruits and fruit juices. Cleaned and portioned fruits from the produce section. Fruit nectars (apricot nectar is a good source of vitamin A). Dried fruits like raisins, prunes, apricots and peaches. Fig Newtons, raisin cookies.

Breads, cereal, rice, & pasta:

Enriched or whole grain bread. Noodles, macaroni, spaghetti. Rolls, frozen bread dough, corn bread mixes, muffin mix, Bisquick, pita bread and tortillas. Twist-can biscuits and roll dough. Instant plain or brown rice. Pizza bread. English muffins, bagels. Pancake mix.

Grocery list: convenient ingredients

Sauces and seasonings let you put together quick and tasty meals from ready-to-go foods. Ingredients you can keep on hand include spaghetti and other sauces in jars, cream soups, seasonings to sprinkle on (like lemon pepper), to mix in (like taco mix), or to serve on the side (like picante, tartar, or cocktail sauce).

Convenient meals from convenient ingredients and foods

- Spaghetti sauce in jars for spaghetti with meat sauce (you can throw in a few vegetables).
- Cream soups for mixing with cooked meat and rice or noodles.
- Dry taco mix to cook with ground beef for tacos or taco salad.
- Lemon pepper for cooking fish or chicken: use with a little butter or margarine, broil or cook in a frying pan.
- Omelets with microwaved frozen vegetables and grated cheese.
- Scrambled eggs with grated cheese topping.
- Baked potato with melted cheese spread.
- Brown chicken, add Cajun seasoning, simmer with Cajun tomatoes. Same goes for Italian.
- Add-your-own-meat soup mixes: beef vegetable with stew meat or chicken noodle with stir-fry chicken.
- Crock pot stew with stew meat and powdered stew mix or canned golden mushroom soup, and prepared vegetables.
- Homemade pizzas with ready-to-eat crust, canned

pizza sauce, preshredded cheese, prechopped vegetables, lean precooked sausage.

- Stir-fry chicken or pork with prepared vegetables. Season with bottled or dry oriental seasoning mix. Serve with instant rice.
- Scalloped potato mix and pieces of ham.
- Tuna salad with cheese slices on buns, wrapped and baked until the cheese melts.
- Ground beef cooked with mushroom soup and mixed vegetables. Top with Tater Tots and bake until the potatoes are done.
- Simmer chicken breasts ahead of time, cool them and cut them up for salads. Add pasta for a full-meal salad.
- Tuna noodle casserole made from canned tuna, cooked noodles and mushroom soup.
- Hot dogs and buns, baked beans, coleslaw made with preshredded cabbage and coleslaw salad dressing.

Have a variety to choose from

Some meals are complete in themselves; some require a salad, vegetable, or fruit to round them out. Always have bread, no matter what. Children never know what they are going to want to eat, so offer a modest variety. If the dinner is a casserole, offer bread and fruit with it. Your child might be more successful with eating, in fact, if you serve a casserole as a sauce-with-vegetables-and-meat-in-it and the noodles or rice on the side.

Always have something really good

If the meal isn't the greatest, have a wonderful bread. Toast some English muffins or bagels. Have some cream cheese to put on them. Make up a box of cornbread or muffins. If the meat isn't so popular, have corn for a vegetable. Offer a variety of snack crackers with the soup.

Don't make assumptions

Don't assume if a food is spicy, or challenging, or even gourmet, that your child won't like it. Mexican children prefer spicy foods. Brazilian children think black beans are everyday fare. Chinese children like sprouted seeds and beans. Russian children like borscht. Italian food is so much a part of our everyday cuisine that we expect children to learn to like it. If you serve something regularly, enjoy it yourself, and don't force your child to eat it, sooner or later he will learn to like it.

For more about planning and cooking enjoyable, fast and simple family meals, adapting meals for children *and* including your child in meal preparation, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999.