

Cooking as a **SUPERPOWER**

by Michelle "Shelly" Vicari, OAC Senior Program Manager

When children learn to cook they aren't just making food, they're discovering a superpower. Cooking is a life skill that builds independence, sparks creativity and helps children feel proud of what they can do for themselves and their family. Even being able to prepare a simple snack or meal helps children feel capable and self-sufficient.

Cooking is like art you can eat. Children get to experiment with colors, textures and flavors. They can swap ingredients, play with shapes, arrange foods in fun designs and try new ways of preparing meals. This freedom encourages them to think outside the box and make cooking a personal expression. Creativity in the kitchen often leads to more curiosity and more willingness to try new foods. Studies from the Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research and Appetite suggest that cooking participation during childhood is linked with better diet quality into adolescence and adulthood.

When a child serves food they helped make, they get to see smiles around the table. That sense of accomplishment — "I made this!" — is powerful. It reinforces positive feelings about food, family and their own abilities. It also creates moments where children see the impact of their efforts giving them a sense of belonging and contribution. Cooking builds skills that children will carry for the rest of their lives. From learning to measure, stir and chop safely to understanding how different ingredients work together, every step offers a chance to learn and grow.



Here are some kid-friendly recipes that the whole family can enjoy:

AUTUMN APPLE NACHOS

You'll Need:

- Apples sliced thin
- Warm almond or peanut butter (for drizzling)
- Toppings: dried cranberries, raisins, shelled pumpkin seeds or sunflower seeds, crushed peanuts or almonds, graham cracker crumbs
- Mini chocolate chips (optional)

Directions:

Slice apples and spread on a plate. Microwave nut butter for 20-second intervals until drizzle consistency. Drizzle nut butter over the top. Sprinkle with toppings of your choice. Share and enjoy!

FUN FACT: In the United States apples are one of the most popular fruits, and there are more than 2,500 varieties grown. Grab a few different varieties for this recipe and vote on favorites.



"When children learn to cook they aren't just making food, they're discovering a superpower."

BUILD-YOUR-OWN QUESADILLA PARTY

You'll Need:

- Whole wheat tortillas
- Shredded cheese (cheddar, mozzarella or Mexican blend)
- Protein choices: black beans, grilled chicken strips, grilled steak, scrambled eggs
- Veggie choices: peppers, spinach, mushrooms, corn or tomatoes
- Extras: salsa, guacamole, hot sauce, sour cream or Greek yogurt for dipping

Set up a toppings bar so everyone can choose their own fillings. On half of a tortilla add cheese plus any toppings you like. With an adult's help, cook in a skillet or bake in the oven until the cheese melts and the tortilla turns golden. Slice into wedges and serve with dips.

FUN TWIST: Turn dinner into a taste test panel. Each person presents their quesadilla and the family votes on categories like "cheesiest," "most colorful" or "spiciest."



ITALIAN CAPRESE PASTA SALAD

You'll Need:

- 8 oz pasta (penne, rotini or farfalle)
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes halved
- 1 cup mozzarella balls or cubes
- ½ cup fresh basil leaves torn
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 Tbsp balsamic vinegar
- ¼ tsp dried oregano
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

With an adult's help, cook pasta in boiling water until tender. Drain and rinse cool. Slice tomatoes and chop basil. Whisk olive oil, balsamic and seasonings for dressing. Toss pasta with tomatoes, cheese and basil. Drizzle dressing and stir. Chill for 20–30 minutes before serving.

FUN FACT: This pasta salad is inspired by an Italian Caprese salad which uses the colors of the Italian flag — red tomatoes, white mozzarella and green basil.



"That sense of accomplishment — 'I made this!' — is powerful."



GREEK TZATZIKI WITH PITA AND VEGGIES

You'll Need:

- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- ½ cucumber grated and squeezed dry
- 1 clove garlic minced (or ½ tsp garlic powder)
- 1 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- 1 Tbsp fresh dill or mint (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Whole wheat pita bread cut into triangles
- Sliced veggies: bell peppers, carrots, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes

Directions:

Grate cucumber then squeeze out water. Mix yogurt, cucumber, garlic, olive oil, lemon juice and herbs. Season with salt and pepper. Cut the pita into triangles and warm. Wash and slice veggies. Serve dip in a bowl surrounded by pita and veggies for dipping.

FUN FACT: Tzatziki is a traditional Greek dip made with yogurt, cucumber and herbs. Cucumber is made up of more than 90% water, which makes tzatziki super refreshing.

THE KITCHEN IS A CLASSROOM

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: Reading recipes and using cooking terms builds vocabulary and comprehension. Talking through steps strengthens listening and communication.

SCIENCE IN ACTION: Cooking is hands-on science. Heating, freezing, baking and mixing show how things change. Simple questions like “Why does water boil?” or “What happens when we put this in the oven?” spark curiosity.

MATH SKILLS: Measuring cups teach fractions and comparisons. Counting and sorting ingredients build number sense. Doubling or halving recipes puts math into real-world practice

HEALTH AND NUTRITION LEARNING: Comparing labels or talking about why we need protein, fiber and healthy fats builds awareness. Kids see that food is fuel for energy, growth and play

WORLD KNOWLEDGE: Exploring recipes from different countries helps children learn about geography, history and culture. Cooking foods from around the world opens conversations about traditions, languages and customs, building appreciation for diversity and expanding global awareness.

PARENT TIPS:

- Ask open-ended questions to keep children curious and thinking.
- Start small: let them wash veggies, stir batter or set out toppings.
- Give kids choices so they feel ownership.
- Celebrate effort by praising the process, not just the finished product.

Cooking doesn't have to be complicated to make a big impact. Inviting children into the kitchen teaches them that food is fuel, family time, fun and learning all at once. With each recipe, they build confidence, creativity and knowledge, and that is why cooking into a true superpower.

COOKING WITH KIDS MUST-HAVES

- Step stool
- Child-safe knife
- Mixing bowls that are lightweight and non-breakable
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Small cutting board
- Apron
- Silicone spatula
- Mini whisk
- Snack-sized containers
- Oven mitts for kids

About the Author:

Michelle “Shelly” Vicari is the Senior Program Manager of the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). She studied Child Development & Family Studies and Political Science at San Diego State University and previously served as Curriculum Director for the largest NAEYC-accredited child care centers in Southern California. At OAC, she leads a variety of education and support initiatives, including Thrive Together, a youth and families program that provides resources, community and events for children, teens and parents affected by obesity.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



PUBLIC
EDUCATION



ADVOCACY



ANNUAL
CONVENTION



NATIONAL
AWARENESS
CAMPAIGNS



VIBRANT
COMMUNITY

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

**Through the OAC Community,
you can get access to:**

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](https://obesityaction.org/join)

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction