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Let Kids In On Cooking Because Dinner Doesn't Just Magically Appear

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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As many parents know, planning a healthy lunch for your kids every single day of the week is a lot of work. During the last week of school in June, a friend tells me one set of parents in her daughter's class gave up completely. They just sent her school a Happy Meal every day with Uber Eats.

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Dinners are just as hard. Making tasty, healthy meals requires time and planning. It makes it even more frustrating when the kids turn up their noses and make gagging noises over my carefully prepared curried quinoa.

This spring I tried to turn their “ewws” into “mmms.” I resisted the temptation to order out or coat everything with cheese. Instead, I just pulled them into the cooking process. One night in May, I had a recipe laid out for a healthy stew with some of their not-so-favourite ingredients: onions, tomatoes, black beans, bulger, corn, celery, etc. I didn’t tell them what we were making, but presented it like an initiation into grown-up life. Plus they would get to use fire and sharp objects, so they were pumped.

We began by chopping up the ingredients. My two eldest daughters are seven (Sonia) and five (Elizabeth), and I told them they were ready to try a real cooking knife. I showed them how to hold it properly, how to keep the tip of the knife on the cutting board and how to curl the non-cutting hand into a ball to avoid cut fingers. I kept my hands on theirs as a guide and showed them how to use the weight of the knife to push down. They thought it was cool, using a big knife like that, until the onions started stinging their eyes.

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Actually, they thought it was hilarious that an onion could make you cry like that. So tears suddenly became part of the story: the onions really didn’t want to become part of the soup, and we were mourning their loss; bulbs martyred to the cause of culinary greatness.

Elizabeth decided she preferred stirring, so Sonia poured them into a skillet of hot oil and Elizabeth kept them moving. We added some garlic, some paprika and some ginger and the ingredients started to brown.

“Mmmm,” said Sonia, holding her nose above the vapours, “smells good.”

“I can’t wait,” said Elizabeth, “can we eat it now?”

I was about to launch into an exasperated rant along the lines of, “but this is the same thing you said you hated last week!” but instead I kept the momentum going.

“No,” I responded, “we’ve got more to add before its finished.”

In went the bulger, then the celery, followed by the tomatoes and the corn. It started to look more like stew; it started to smell more like stew.

We then set the table with spoons and glasses, but not before clearing the table of cut-up construction paper, glue and the latest edition of *J’aime lire*.

“This is a lot of work,” said Elizabeth. I bit my tongue.

When the stew was ready we scooped it into bowls and served it up. The kids had

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pride in dinner that day, and glowed when their mother and baby sister thanked them for their work. The kids explained the process in their own words to my wife. They talked about cutting and frying and crying and cleaning in a jumble of words between mouthfuls.

Since that day, although they are not indiscriminating champions of my food, they are a little more likely to say “thanks for dinner” when we eat. Elizabeth still helps out at least once a week. When her older sister is reading after school she often gets bored and asks to pull up a chair and help with dinner.

Her speciality is making salads. After tearing the lettuce, washing it with water, and churning the salad spinner up to unimaginable speeds, most of the lettuce eventually makes it to the bowl. A lot of it ends up in her mouth, but if it works to get her eating salad, I'm OK with it.

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It's certainly more work than a Happy Meal, and cooking takes *so* much longer with kids, so I'm not about to cook like this every day. But when we prepare our food together I know that my kids are not only eating healthier, but also learning that good food takes love and effort to prepare and doesn't just magically appear on the table **SHARE** night.



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