

Kids in the kitchen can help prevent childhood obesity
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In the past four decades, childhood obesity has increased more than fourfold among those ages 6 to 11. More than 23 million children and teenagers in the United States ages 2 to 19 are obese or overweight, a statistic that health and medical experts consider an epidemic. An epidemic that puts nearly one third of America's children at early risk for Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and even stroke – conditions usually associated with adulthood.

September 2011 is National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month. I can think of no better time to start taking small steps to help reverse this trend. We are all aware of the positive effects of eating more balanced meals and engaging in increased physical activity. But in addition to keeping healthier foods around the house and encouraging children to make positive choices, another way to combat the growing waistline is to get them involved in the kitchen!

Research indicates that children's lack of cooking skills may be contributing to the nation's growing obesity rate. Children who do not know how to cook often rely on less nutritious, pre-packaged foods that can be prepared with minimal skill. Therefore, it appears that we are raising a generation of children who are trained only in the use of a microwave in food preparation. Cooking with your children not only feeds the family but also teaches valuable cooking skills and increases healthy eating habits.

Before you put the youth-sized apron on there are a few things to keep in mind. First, make sure that you cook when you are not in a rush to eat. What takes an adult five minutes to do, might take double the time with little fingers.

Start slow and be realistic about how much your child can do based on their age and developmental stage. Age appropriate activities can range from something as simple as stirring with a rubber spatula, counting out the cherry tomatoes to put on your salad, or husking corn and chopping vegetables. Expecting too much from your assistant chef may discourage them from participating in the future.

Steer clear of recipes that are too elaborate at first. There are cook books at the library and local bookstores filled with fun and easy kid-friendly recipes. You can also find healthy recipes on the internet and at your local county extension office.

Every child can benefit from helping at meal times. Learning new skills can increase self-esteem and the bonding that occurs from family cooking is invaluable. Most importantly, children can develop healthy eating habits in the kitchen that will help create healthy eating habits for life.

For more information about the 4-H program or other youth development issues, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.