



Early Relational Health:

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

What is Early Relational Health?

Early Relational Health refers to the responsive, affectionate, and warm interactions between parents/caregivers and infants/toddlers in daily activities like caregiving and play. These interactions are crucial for children's development and well-being.

Why Does Early Relational Health Matter?

- Supports Child Development: Positive interactions support physical, emotional, and cognitive growth while reducing the impact of childhood adversity.
- Promotes Caregiver Well-Being: Enhances bonding, reduces anxiety/depression, and improves stress resilience and physical health.
- Builds Positive Relationships: Builds strong foundations for healthy relationships, social skills, emotional regulation, and academic success.

Cooking Together Fosters Early Relational Health

Cooking and sharing a meal together promotes early relational health. Engaging children in cooking and during meal times promotes bonding, communication, life skills and good dietary habits. Cooking with children takes extra time and patience. But when you slow down and make it fun (for both of you), it is well worth the effort!

*Food, Activity and Nutrition
Initiatives*

Quick Tips to Try Today

Mix in Math

Cooking is a great opportunity to teach kids about math. You can count how many pieces you chop, "add" the ingredients together or "divide" the meal into equal portions (e.g. cut a fruit in half).

Make Conversation

Point out what things smell, feel and taste like, "Does this taste sweet or salty? Is this rough or smooth? Slimy or dry? Hot or cold?" You can ask questions "what is your favorite food?" as well as ones that require longer answers like, "what do you think is going to happen when we add milk to the batter?" Make sure to share stories with your child about YOUR favorite foods and what makes them special.

Laugh Together

Even babies love being silly, but as they get older they begin to discover humor and develop imagination. You can be silly and join the pretend game. Maybe you can be the baby and your child can be the mom or dad?

Age-Appropriate Cooking Tasks

For Young Children



Ages 1-2 Years Old

Mixing Ingredients

Toddlers can help mix ingredients in a bowl using a spoon or their hands. Use simple ingredients like pancake batter or mashed fruits and vegetables.

Tearing Soft Foods

Provide soft foods like lettuce leaves or bread and encourage toddlers to tear them into smaller pieces. This helps develop fine motor skills.

Sprinkling Ingredients

Let toddlers sprinkle toppings like shredded cheese or herbs onto dishes with supervision. This allows them to participate in meal preparation and develop hand-eye coordination.

Narrate As You Cook

Pretend you are on a cooking show and narrate and show your child various steps in the cooking, especially those that are on the counter and do not involve heat. Allow your child to taste ingredients along the way. This interaction facilitates discussion and introduces your child to new vocabulary.

Clearing the Table

Cooking involves just as much cleaning as preparation. Encourage children to clear their place when the meal is done. Making up a “clean-up song” and singing together or playing dance music as you clean makes the task more joyful.

When involving kids in cooking, select age-appropriate tasks and supervise children closely when they are handling utensils or cooking tools to ensure their safety.

Ages 3-4 Years Old

Washing Produce

Teach preschoolers how to wash fruits and vegetables under running water. Use a small scrub brush for tougher skins like potatoes or cucumbers.

Mashing

Provide a potato masher or fork for preschoolers to mash soft cooked vegetables like potatoes or avocados. This helps them feel involved in preparing mashed dishes.

Assembling Simple Snacks

·Guide preschoolers in assembling simple snacks like fruit kabobs or mini sandwiches. Let them choose their favorite ingredients and arrange them on skewers or bread slices.

Tasting

Ask preschoolers to taste a dish before it is served. Have a conversation on how it tastes and ask for the recommendations on adding more of various ingredients.

Use Cooking to Experiment Together:
“What else can we add to the salad? What happens if we add strawberries?”
“This batter is too thick; what do you think we should add?”

Age-Appropriate Cooking Tasks

For Young Children



Ages 5+ Years Old

Picking Recipes

Flip through recipe books or magazines with your child. Discuss the different recipes you find and encourage your child to select one they would like to try. You can search for letters that your child knows in the recipes—make it a game! And you can use cooking to talk about your family's culture and background. Are there traditional recipes that remind you of when you were little? What makes them special?

Measuring Ingredients

Introduce basic measuring skills by allowing kindergarteners to scoop and level ingredients like flour, sugar, or rice using measuring cups and spoons. Talk about the measures, “is a half-cup bigger than one-third of a cup?” “Which carrot is longer?”

Stirring and Mixing

Encourage kindergarteners to stir and mix ingredients in a bowl using a whisk or spatula. They can help prepare batter for pancakes, muffins, or simple sauces.

Cutting Soft Foods with a Butter Knife

Under close supervision, teach kindergarteners how to use a butter knife to cut soft foods like bananas, strawberries, or cheese into small, manageable pieces. Celebrate how big they are now and how proud you are that they can do things on their own.

Setting the Table

Teach kindergarteners how to set the table by arranging utensils, plates, and cups. This instills responsibility and helps them feel involved in mealtime preparation. Thank them for being a helper and for a job well done.

Age-appropriate cooking tasks engage children in the kitchen and promote the development of language, fine motor skills, independence, and confidence. Tell your child how much you love spending time with them. Cooking together is a wonderful opportunity to share moments of joy and connection.

Bon Appetit!