

Beyond the 'children's table'

Johnathan L. Wright (JWRIGHT@RGJ.COM)

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

November 8, 2006

Like the old adage that describes movie making, Thanksgiving Day often includes a lot of "hurry up and wait."

But many kids don't like to hurry up and wait. They get hungry, especially if Thanksgiving meal is served when they don't usually eat. They get bored or restless, and then idle hands can make mischief or messes. Even in the most relaxed families, children sometimes feel the weight of Thanksgiving expectations.

"You really want your kids to behave because you see people you don't see all year," said Joy Souza of Reno, who has a 12-year-old daughter. "Unfortunately, there's no Easter egg hunt or opening presents on Thanksgiving. There's just eating and socializing, and for kids, that's at the bottom of their priorities."

But even without the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus, cooking and child experts said children enjoy being involved in Thanksgiving preparations. Including children keeps them occupied, creates memories, teaches life skills and helps families celebrate togetherness.

And you won't even have to stuff the bird with macaroni and cheese.

A spoon of one's own

"The concept of having some kind of ownership over the holidays is important for kids," said Jerry Gulley, editor-in-chief of Allrecipes.com, a popular home cooking and culinary advice Web site.

One easy way to create ownership is to have children assist the chef. Starting at about age 3, kids can stir ingredients, mash potatoes, smear whipped cream onto pies and open packages. Older children can locate and measure ingredients, knead bread, keep track of roasting times and choose recipes from cookbooks and the Internet.

"Don't worry about the finished product," said Jyl Steinback, author of "The Busy Mom's Slow Cooker Cookbook" (2005, Meredith) and owner of AmericasHealthiestMom.com. "Focus on age-appropriate skills, safety and fun."

Focus, too, on "allowing children to really do the work" -- that builds self confidence and shows kids meals don't come from the food fairy, said Katie Wilton, a chef and author of "You're the Cook," a cookbook for ages 9 and older (2006, www.cookingwithkatie.com).

Kitchen duty also teaches kids about equipment safety, reading recipes and the importance of hand washing.

Plus, "anytime a child is involved with a meal, they are going to taste it because they actually made it," said Suzy Vinson Nettles, one of the founders of Young Chefs Academy, a kids cooking school with more than 130 locations nationwide.

Where's the mac and cheese?

That's good news for parents of picky eaters, whose palate preferences often collide with what's on the menu.

"My daughter only eats a few things -- grilled cheese, cheese pizza, spaghetti if the tomato sauce is puréed," said Tim Duerson of Reno, whose daughter is 5-years-old. "I know this sounds bad, but you're cooking all day on Thanksgiving, and it's just easier to give her a grilled cheese sandwich."

Appeasement is an attractive strategy, especially for parents of young children assessing the possibility of a temper tantrum. A less indulgent strategy would be to serve at least one side dish the picky eater likes.

Parents can even acclimate their children to troublesome Thanksgiving foods by consistently serving those foods before the holiday.

"Keep putting it on the plate," said Angela Lemond, a registered dietitian with Children's Medical Center Dallas. "Children need exposure up to 15 times to start eating a new food."

Eventually, however, even the pickiest child must learn -- and what better time than Thanksgiving? -- that politeness and etiquette sometimes trump personal preference.

"You say, 'We're not here for a custom meal,'" advised Tanya Wenman Steel, editor-in-chief of Epicurious.com and author of the upcoming "Real Food for Real Kids: 300+ Wholesome Recipes Your Junior Food Critic Will Love" (2007, HarperCollins).

"You say, 'We're here to be a family, to be together, to give thanks.'"

And with children increasingly being moved from kids' tables to the main table, according to experts, it's become increasingly important that parents use Thanksgiving to school their offspring in saying hello, saying please and thank you, holding utensils properly and other basic manners.

Table vigilance

For some children, Thanksgiving presents not just food choices but food concerns.

For parents of children with food allergies, "it's essential to let the host know about allergies well before the gathering," said Anne Muñoz-Furlong, founder and CEO of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network. "Call ahead. Take time to be prepared."

That may include bringing some foods you know your children can eat; a gracious host won't object.

Parents should also be aware of hidden allergens like milk and soy in water-added hams, eggs and oysters in stuffings, and tree nuts or peanuts in cranberry salad.

For overweight children, "Thanksgiving dinner is one meal out of the year they should be able to eat whatever they want," said Heidi Shoemaker, a registered dietitian with Renown Health in Reno.

That said, Shoemaker added that overweight kids should balance their Thanksgiving meal with physical activity, which is a good habit for "all the other days of the year when what they eat does matter."

Other lessons

Children can learn more than culinary, etiquette or nutrition lessons at Thanksgiving.

Parents from broken or blended families should use the occasion to teach kids poise and manners among people they might now know well, said Stacy D. Phillips, a children's advocate and certified specialist in family law from Los Angeles.

"Set a good example. Tell them, 'These are new family members. We are going to show how wonderful and polite we are. Right now, they're family by relationship, but over time, they will feel like our family.'"

Generosity can be demonstrated by having "your child pick out some canned goods to donate to your local food bank," said Stacy DeBroff, founder of Momcentral.com and author of "The Mom Book: 4,278 of Mom Central's Tips -- For Moms from Moms" (2002, Free Press).

Carleton Kendrick, a Massachusetts family therapist and co-author of "Take Out Your Nose Ring, Honey, We're Going to Grandma's," said kids could help prepare a family "gratitude recipe" by counting their the blessings and naming people who've been kind to them.

Teach your children, Kendrick said, "to celebrate the abundance in their lives."

<http://news.rgj.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061108/FOOD/611080305/1090> (link no longer available!)