

How to Make Family Cooking a Quarantine Refuge

More than six months into COVID-19, families are growing understandably stressed, tired and bored. The challenges of this year have manifested themselves in obvious areas like work and school, but many families haven't stopped to think about how their mid-pandemic eating habits could affect their long-term health.

For tired parents in the midst of a stressful year, mealtime is often a case in pragmatism — it's much easier to order takeout or swing by a drive through rather than taking the time to prepare lunch or dinner.

But amid the pandemic, it's more important than ever for parents to put their family's health first. That's why the American Dairy Association Mideast is reminding parents of the importance of meals and snacks that include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and dairy to help ensure families are getting the nutrition they need. Dairy provides nine essential nutrients and delivers protein to fuel the entire family through the day.

"I have two teenagers at home, so it can be difficult to keep up with them and make sure they're eating right," said Lisa Andrews, MEd, RD, LD, a registered dietitian from Cincinnati, Ohio. "Communication has been key, letting them know what's in the kitchen for them to make, as well as keeping things in the house that I know they like and pack a big nutritional punch. My oldest has fallen in love with [whipped coffee](#), which is fine with me because I know she's getting a serving of milk and not too much added sugar."

Parents and children spend all day working or learning, so why would they want to spend more time apart during the preparation of meals? Now is a great opportunity to get kids involved in the kitchen to learn valuable skills, while taking some of the burden off of parents who are balancing more than ever before.

"A lot of parents think they have to take this all on themselves, but kids can be a big help in the kitchen and a few simple cooking skills can empower them to create healthy meals and take some stress off of busy parents," said Andrews. "It's a great opportunity to talk to kids about what's in their food and how to create a balanced meal, while also teaching them vital skills that will be valuable long after this pandemic is over."

Here are some tips from Andrews to help give your family's nutrition a reboot:

- **Keep Nutritious Staples on Hand** - Having some nutritious and versatile staples in the kitchen can take a lot of the work out of meal planning. Frozen fruits and vegetables, shredded cheese, whole grain rice and pasta are good to keep on hand. And having handy a jar of pesto or those convenient squeeze tubes of garlic and ginger will help spice up meals and are easy for kids to use without a lot of chopping. You can also sauté some onions and peppers and keep in the fridge. What doesn't make it into tonight's quesadillas can be thrown into tomorrow's pasta. It's also a good idea to stock your fridge and pantry with healthy snacks, like string cheese, nuts, fruit and yogurt, for kids.

- **Get the Kids Involved** - Different skills are appropriate for different age groups, but getting the kids involved in making meals can be a big help, whether they are taking over dinner one night a week or are just able to make themselves lunch while learning at home. These skills will build over time and will serve them well into their future.
- **Have Fun!** - Get creative, explore recipes on [Drink-Milk.com](https://www.drink-milk.com) and try something new. Sharing an adventure in the kitchen with your family can be a welcome break from the stress of today's world and you never know what you'll discover until you break out of your cooking comfort zone. For Andrews, it was an apple and cheddar quesadilla that was a bit of an experiment but is now a regular on their menu.

“While this is really stressful, I think it's a great opportunity for people to learn and teach their kids as they grow,” she said. “And hopefully they're learning some skills that they can take with them when they leave the house, if we ever leave the house.”

You'll find healthy breakfast, lunch, snack and dessert recipes to create and enjoy with the whole family at [drink-milk.com](https://www.drink-milk.com).