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Hey Good-lookin', What's Cookin'?

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When my children were toddlers, life was full of eating, cooking and eating (like it is now, except that there are larger portions to dole out these days). Years ago a friend and I came up with the idea of a "cooking playgroup" because we were busy with children and in need of the company of other grownups. Our culinary group got together for years and friendships deepened due to our shared experiences in the heat of the kitchen.

Having young children is not a prerequisite for starting a cooking group; all it takes is a few friends, a few hours and voila!- you've got a creative outlet for making delicious meals with less effort, more creativity, and the perk of good company.

Here are some tips on how to organize a cooking group:

1. Four to six people seems to be an appropriate size. More chefs and there may not be enough room in the kitchen; less and there is a greater chance that on some days turnout will be too low.

2. I suggest setting a consistent day and time. For a while I cooked with two separate groups (double the fun) and because of fixed schedules the logistics weren't a problem.

3. The usual modus operandi is to take turns hosting. The host figures out the menu and purchases enough ingredients for the number of families to be fed that night. When we rotated turns in alphabetical order, it was easier to track who was hosting and allowed for switching when necessary. In a group of six I hosted every six weeks, plenty of time for meal planning and shopping.

4. The host usually supervises the cooking process because of familiarity with the recipe and kitchen. The longer we cooked together the more adventurous we got. I remember a particular day when I'd decided we'd all make pad thai. It was an experiment that didn't quite land with a thud, but let's just say I had no idea what we were doing and some ingredient adjusting was called for by all! The laughs were worth the adventure.

5. If it's a cooking playgroup, one parent volunteers to supervise the children, who generally mill around between the kitchen and play areas.

6. Each person brings a storage container and at the end of a couple of hours, every family will have one (usually) delicious meal that was made by a parent who was enjoying her time. Refreshing new recipes, cuisines and the anticipation of a surprise dinner are some other benefits of a cooking group.

In olden times, communal cooking around a central hearth was a vital part of one's day. Loneliness and social isolation were probably less existent and a sense of comfort and belonging probably more the norm. In these current stressful times when many feel harried and hurried, perhaps slowing down to whip up a dinner with some friends is the ticket to handling some of the challenges of everyday life. This might also encourage healthier eating and bring us back to a time when making a meal was as important as savoring it.



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