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kids in the garden: nutritious and fun

by Marisa Moore, MBA RDN LD

Ages: Toddler, Preschooler, Gradeschooler, Teen

Topics: Picky Eaters, Fruits, Proteins, Vegetables, Breakfast, Dessert, Dinner, Lunch, Snacks, Energy Balance



Planting a garden can be fun for the entire family. With fruits and vegetables conveniently growing at eye level, planting a garden can have a positive impact on your child's health. In fact, a study in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found that gardening may increase a child's intake of fruits and vegetables, nutrition knowledge and preference for vegetables. Gardening is not only a hands-on way to teach children about where food comes from; it also builds math, science and environmental skills.

Kids love to play in the dirt and gardening is the perfect outlet for that passion. "Kids as young as age two can help in the garden by digging holes and adding seeds," says Jen Haugen, RD, leader of a grocery store gardening program for kids. Older children can transfer seedlings into the ground, water the garden and harvest mature crops. They can also pull or rake out weeds and debris.

Gardening exposes kids to a variety of fruits and vegetables and encourages taste testing straight from the ground and at the dinner table. "Helping kids figure out that [a tomato] can taste good from the vine to fresh salsa brings it full circle and helps them get more out of the experience. It makes a lasting impact," says Haugen.

Haugen advises parents and educators to "think on a kid level." Kids like to see something happen fast. Plant crops that grow quickly like green beans or those that produce heavily like grape tomatoes. Sunflowers are another fun addition to the garden. They grow quickly and can be dried for the seeds. Harvesting carrots and potatoes can be a treasure hunt. "Allow kids to pretend they are digging up a buried



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treasure,” says Haugen. And remember: kids are going to get dirty; that’s part of the fun for them.

Try these other tips for a fun and memorable gardening experience:

- **Get kids involved.** Let your kids help design the garden, select and plant the seeds, harvest and even cook the produce. Allowing children to be involved in every step of the process will get them excited to taste the fruits of their labor.
- **Let your kids do what interests them.** If they want to plant seeds, let them plant. If digging is their thing, let them dig.
- **Teach responsibility.** Assign each child a watering or weeding task.
- **Begin small.** Create a garden with a dinner salad in mind. Plant salad greens, carrots, tomatoes and cucumbers — all kid-friendly and easy to grow.

Don’t have a backyard? That’s OK. Start a container garden on your patio, balcony or on the windowsill in the kitchen. No matter what you plant and whether your carrots look like carrots or something altogether different, have fun. Odds are kids and parents alike will enjoy the time they spend together and learn a little something along the way.

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