



THE PROJECT COOK REPORT

The state of kids' cooking – can
our kids only txt for take-out?



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New Zealand children feel significantly more confident about using a digital camera, installing software on a computer, playing a DVD or sending a text message than cooking a simple meal from a recipe.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND WATTIE'S PROJECT COOK

The results of a new study show that New Zealand children's cooking skills are limited, with most children "rarely" or "never" attempting to make simple home-made meals such as macaroni cheese or spaghetti Bolognese.¹

The Wattie's Project Cook survey of 249 adults and 439 of their children (aged 8 to 14 years) reveals that there are only a couple of basic cooking activities they feel confident to do on their own – cook toast and make a sandwich. In fact, the same survey shows they feel significantly more confident about what might be considered more technically complex tasks such as using a digital camera, installing software on a computer, playing a DVD or sending a text message than cooking a simple meal.

The results show the other types of cookery activities children in these age groups generally get involved in tend to be food assembly tasks, such as helping make pizzas or burgers, but their parents will usually help them. When focusing on basic cooking processes such as boiling an egg or peeling a potato, the study shows skill levels are also low.

However, the good news is that children are keen to cook and their parents are keen for them to learn cooking skills. The survey shows children clearly want to learn about and get involved in food preparation activities, with interest levels peaking at around 10–11 years of age.

So while the skill levels of New Zealand children may not be high, there is a great opportunity to match this thirst for knowledge and experience through increased cookery participation at home and through the education system.

That's why Wattie's has chosen to focus on improving children's cooking skills through the development of Project Cook, a school-based programme aimed at intermediate school children, covering the key knowledge areas of understanding ingredients, food chemistry, cooking and nutrition. It's part of Wattie's commitment to encouraging better nutrition knowledge and healthy eating amongst New Zealanders.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

There is no doubt that food knowledge and cooking skills impact on health. In fact, the Ministry of Health's *Healthy Eating – Healthy Action* framework identifies the development of personal skills as one of the six core approaches for action and nominates young people as a key priority.² This covers the need for an understanding of why issues such as nutrition, physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight are important to good health, and in *Healthy Eating – Healthy Action* school and home are identified as two of the settings in which learning needs to be facilitated.

Cooking skills are necessary in order for young people to understand what constitutes a healthy diet. They're also important for enabling young people to make informed choices when eating outside the home. For example, some knowledge of how things are made is important when selecting pre-prepared foods. Young people with no cooking skills or experience have little understanding of the ingredients and cooking processes likely to have been involved in producing a particular food item and are therefore less able to judge whether it will be a healthy choice.³

In the case of young adults, preparing food and taking personal responsibility for their own diet is an important part of the transition towards independence. But they cannot take adequate care of their own health and nutrition if they do not know how to cook, shop and choose between good, better and best food options.



With our lives today so much busier than ever before, it is increasingly difficult to find the time to prepare family meals. Cooking is an important skill that's gradually being lost, so by teaching our children to cook and involving them in food preparation from an early age they'll have valuable life-long skills.

Low levels of cooking skills in the community also have important long-term implications for health promotion as there is little point in giving nutrition tips and healthy eating advice to people who lack the practical skills to implement them on a daily basis. Therefore, cookery skills and health promotion must be intrinsically linked.

There are also important social reasons why cooking skills matter. Cooking and eating are, quite simply, fun. They're an important vehicle for social engagement. We invite people into our homes to share a meal, we prepare favourite foods for special occasions, and we all know that kids are more likely to eat something they have made themselves! Food is often associated with fun, family and sharing. Enabling our young people to be able to plan and prepare a meal for others is to give them a very valuable life skill.

HOW BEST TO TRANSFER COOKING SKILLS?

Our lives are increasingly busy. There are more single parent homes and many parents work, so even in two parent homes there's less time available to supervise kids' cooking. Children no longer necessarily live close to their grandparents and many grandparents are still in the workforce, making it less likely that children will learn basic cooking skills in their grandmother's kitchen.

Wattie's Project Cook survey reveals there are only two cooking activities that kids regularly do on their own – making breakfast and making a sandwich. Kids also get involved in food assembly tasks such as making pizzas or burgers, but the survey shows they generally have help doing this.

The Wattie's Project Cook survey found that **60 percent of parents surveyed want schools to take a greater role in teaching children to cook**, but it also shows parents are also ready and willing to do their share.

Clearly the teaching of cooking skills is a joint responsibility shared between educators and parents.

99 percent of parents surveyed feel there is a shared responsibility between school and home when it comes to teaching cooking and nutrition

and that food processing and technology learning is best done at school.

95 percent of parents responded positively when asked about the potential appeal of a programme about cooking, nutrition, food processing and technology.

94 percent of children aged 9–12 responded favourably when asked what they thought about a lesson on cooking and how to eat healthily.

The parents felt their children would be more receptive to the messages in the school environment and would get more up-to-date and factual information. They also felt it was more fun for kids to learn alongside their friends at school and that it could help facilitate a partnership between home and school to encourage healthy eating. The children surveyed liked the idea of a school cooking programme because they associate cooking with fun, they want to be healthy, they also want to be able to make their own meals and help cook at home.

“Far from being an out of date and irrelevant skill, an argument can be made that possession of cooking skills can be empowering in a world where the individual is faced with a bewildering array of ready-prepared foods. Cooking skills prepare people to make choices in a fast changing food world. Without the skills, choice and control are diminished and a dependency culture emerges.”³

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Getting Kids Cooking

Project Cook is a teaching resource developed by Wattie's in association with food, nutrition and teaching experts which has been distributed to 1600 schools throughout New Zealand. The aim is to get kids cooking in a fun and interactive way through both classroom and home-based activities. It's designed for use within the Technology curriculum, targeted at children in Years 7&8.

Project Cook is based around five recipes that demonstrate a range of cooking skills and link to a number of key nutrition messages and food technology examples. The Project Cook resource comprises a folder of lesson plans, activity suggestions and supporting information as well as a 20 minute video highlighting the basics of each recipe.

Project Cook files are available to download at www.watties.co.nz

References

1. *Can our kids only txt for takeout?* Research conducted by Colmar Brunton, May 2004
2. Ministry of Health, *Healthy Eating – Healthy Action, A Strategic Framework*, 2003
3. Lang, T. & Caraher M. *Is there a culinary skills transition? Data and debate from the UK about changes in cooking culture.* Journal of the HEIA, Vol. 8, No. 2, p 2–14, 2001

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