

Kids in the kitchen

'Conductor camp' helps healthful habits start early for children

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By **Lucinda Breeding** / Features Editor

The fight against childhood obesity can start in the very same place where parents can nudge their children toward trying new foods: the family kitchen.

Amy Cole, co-owner of The Dinner Station in Corinth, said the meal-assembly business struck a chord with busy moms and dads when the business launched "conductor camp" over the summer. It turns out the informal camps, which take about two hours, are more than just an introduction to food and cooking.

"When Kristi Long and I started this business two years ago, moms would come in to put their meals together and they'd ask, 'Can I bring my kids?' For health and safety reasons, we always had to say no," Cole said.

The Dinner Station is a meal assembly outlet that allows patrons to put a menu together using ingredients that have already been cleaned, chopped and prepared. They can make six meals worth of a dish, or assemble a half-size portion for three meals. The meals can be frozen or put right into the oven. It takes up to two hours to assemble the meals, and the Corinth outlet has flourished.

Women were still interested in bringing along children, and its conductor camp — which plays on the "station" theme of the business — introduced children into The Dinner Station in a safe and supervised way. Children age 5 and older can sign up.

"I have two boys," said Denton resident Kelly King, who has shepherded them through the camp more than once. "They love to set the table and they ask, 'Is this our homework, to come home and cook it?' The food groups part of this has been really good. He asks me things like, 'Does this have calories?'"

Kings' sons, Jordan and Joshua, are 8 and 5, and both have been through the camp, which takes them through the steps to make a chicken pot pie and a "dirt" cake. The camp uses fresh ingredients, including vegetables, in the meals.

The camp isn't merely a Cooking 101 session. It teaches children about etiquette. Before the campers start moving through the stations, they mash a piece of raw biscuit dough in their hands, then mash another one around after washing their hands. They are sealed in separate plastic bags.

"You put both of them in the window, and the one they handle before washing their hands grows a lot more mold," Cole said.

There are four distinct stations during the camp. At one station, children learn about kitchen safety. At another, they learn about measuring ingredients. The remaining stations give the children a lesson in digestion and table manners.

Corinth resident Melanie Lewis said the camp has gotten her 5-year-old daughter, Brooklyn, more curious about food.

"It gets them more interested in preparing food. Even simple sandwiches, they like to make them for us now. We cook a lot more than we used to. There is a whole lot less frozen pizza," Lewis said.

Cole said some children might show more interest in vegetables and fruit if they help with meal preparation, and get to do some slicing. That can get them more accustomed to the scent and texture of foods, and might alleviate anxiety about unfamiliar foods.

"I think it's been great," Lewis said. "She asks for extra carrots now. It's more fun for her to sit down and eat something herself because she helped with it."

Brooklyn was especially deliberate when it came to measuring rice.

"See?" she said, scraping a makeshift leveling tool across a heaping spoon of brown rice. "You have to level it. This has to be real level or it can't go in the water."

The campers get a conductor's cap, a train whistle, their potpie and dirt cakes to take home. They also get their mold-growing raw biscuits.

Cole said she's been surprised to hear that one session in the kitchen sparks a new family ritual for some of her clients.

"I think if anything was a surprise it was hearing how it carries over at home," Cole said. "It gets them thinking about dinner."

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TAKE-HOME TIPS

Amy Cole offers some take-home tips on getting children to help prepare meals, which might just get them to try a new, healthful food:

- * Children can help you get dinner together. A sturdy plastic knife is kid-safe and will cut raw veggies and fruit. A smaller child can cut an orange or bell pepper and be proud to help. It also familiarizes the child with different smells and textures without pressure to sample it.
- * Have small rubber gloves for children who help with meals. The gloves will remind them not to rub their eyes.
- * Have ready-made, refrigerated biscuit dough handy. Children can make rolls, croissants or cut shapes to bake and eat.
- * Let kids wrap fish in foil before you pop it in the oven.
- * Don't worry about a meal being pretty. The objective is to recruit your children and spend time together in an activity that is nourishing and pleasant.
- * Get the kids to help when you have time, or plan to build extra time into meals that you prepare together.

CONDUCTOR CAMP

What: A children's program at The Dinner Station in Corinth

When: By appointment

Where: The Dinner Station, 7650 S. Interstate 35E, Suite 104 in Corinth.

Details: Camp is \$30 per child. Space is limited. For more information, visit www.thedinnerstation.com or call 940-321-0838