

Go Ahead, Give Your Toddler A Kitchen Knife

BY: SUJATA GUPTA



Adam Goodenough, the author's husband, demonstrates chopping for their son, Eka Gupta Goodenough, 3.

My 3-year-old son has an inexplicable fondness for the whisk. And we are pros, my son and I, at making blueberry and chocolate muffins and spooning out cookie batter.

But when it comes to leafy greens or butternut squash, my son gets bored. He starts whining or throwing things or yelling at his baby sister. That's because he's not allowed to use a knife. And without having helped prepare them, he's not so inclined to eat those beautiful vegetables either.

Many agree with my general stance that equipping a child with a knife to help out in the kitchen sounds like a recipe for wounds and lost appendages. Both my mother and mother-in-law recoiled when I suggested letting my son try his hand at chopping. Yet research, and the experience of educators, suggest that parents such as me would be wise to hand a tot a knife.

As part of the practical skills curriculum at Montessori schools, children as young as 18 months old are given a butter or jam knife for spreading condiments. Then they move on to chopping soft fruits like bananas. Eventually the child graduates to a serrated knife. (Supersharp chef knives are not part of the program.)

The process is slow and supervised. "Kids are shown early on, even when they're using the butter knife to cut the banana, how to hold the handle, where to put the other hand, how to stabilize the banana," says Anna Perry, executive director of Seton Montessori Institute and Schools in the Chicago area.

Giving young children knives is a small component of Montessori education, Perry says, but it complements the central philosophy of fostering independence. "This drive to 'do it myself' — we're squashing as a society," says Perry.

From a health and nutrition standpoint, studies [have shown](#) that getting kids cooking makes them more open to eating healthful foods, such as fruits and vegetables. With picky eating peaking between the ages of 2 and 6 — and my son is no exception — I've been hoping that letting him interact with his food in a meaningful way may reduce struggles at the dinner table. Both the [Mayo Clinic](#) and the [American Heart Association](#) suggest that getting kids involved with grocery shopping and food prep can reduce picky eating.

There's also an evolutionary argument for allowing children to learn how to cut their food themselves. A child's world, [David Lancy](#), an anthropologist at Utah State University in Logan and author of *The Anthropology of Childhood*, tells me, used to be filled with tools, such as hammers, rakes, mortars, pestles and machetes to break open foods like coconuts.



Eka Gupta Goodenough, 3, the author's son, uses a starter knife to chop yellow squash.

Nowadays, though, the only real tools many kids use on a daily basis are spoons and forks. In an article titled "Playing with Knives" to appear later this year in the journal *Child Development*, Lancy writes that contemporary parental overprotectiveness is linked to rising incomes and declining family size, factors that have turned children into "precious treasures rather than future helpers."

Historically, it appears that humans not only gave the littlest members of society access to tools but also let them sort out the danger for themselves. Even now, in many communities around the world, young children still have access to sharp tools.

For instance, Lancy recounts the experience of a colleague working in the Amazon rain forest: A Piraha child "was playing with a sharp kitchen knife, about 9 inches in length. He was swinging the knife blade around him, often coming close to his eyes, his chest, his arm and other body parts. When he dropped the knife, his mother — talking to someone else — reached backward nonchalantly without interrupting her conversation, picked up the knife and handed it back to the toddler."

And he describes how another colleague observing the Aka, a group of forest foragers in Central Africa, heard from a parent there: "I don't like it when our children play with machetes, but if the baby decides to play, I leave it. And if the baby cuts themselves and if they see the blood, they themselves will decide not to play with the machete."

Lancy says that this laissez-faire approach to parenting has several explanations, among them parents' unwillingness to impose their will on another, even a child, and the belief that children must learn through exploration, regardless of the risks.

Here in the U.S, parents don't seem to be denying kids access to knives entirely but rather delaying it. A perusal of cooking classes for kids online, for instance, shows that the earliest knives are allowed in the kitchen is around age 7.

Yet Lancy and others argue that delaying knife use until then hinders the child's natural development and inhibits curiosity. It's akin to delaying potty training until elementary school, says Elizabeth Norman, director of advancement at Brickton Montessori School in Chicago. "You're creating a dependency that's not needed," Norman says. "Why would you do that to a child?"

Michelle Stern, author of *The Whole Family Cookbook*, says small children can wield other kitchen tools safely, too. Toddlers can use peelers to create ribbons of zucchini, though Stern notes that peelers are less safe than knives. Kids can also take on a hand-powered food chopper to dice onions. "I don't think a child can feel more proud than when you hand them a grown-up instrument to use," Stern says, adding that adults should make sure the kids always understand how to hold the food to be chopped.

I gave the matter a lot of thought. And finally, I had my 3-year-old help me cut some squash with a serrated knife. He still has 10 fingers. I've decided not to give the baby a machete just yet.