



Building Blocks of Resilience

Cooking in Times of Stress

WHY IS COOKING IMPORTANT?

Although home cooking isn't the cure-all for complex issues like health and inequality that we sometimes think it is, it does offer benefits for families. For some, cooking can help relieve stress and provide nourishment that isn't as easily available from options like ready-made meals or take-out food. It can be an affordable way to keep the cost of feeding a family low, and to provide cultural connection and care for loved ones. When we cook at home, we're more likely to rely on whole ingredients with shorter, more direct supply chains. In this way, cooking can also help us feel more control over the food we put into our bodies.

Many of these benefits have been thrown into view during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our options for eating out have been limited. Our ability to access food ingredients has at times been disrupted. Even as we spend more time at home, most of us are also facing a variety of extra stressors related to things like finances, caregiving, socializing, and health.

WHAT MAKES COOKING STRESSFUL?

Despite its advantages, cooking regularly at home is hard, even in the best of times. In a world where work increasingly seeps into our home lives and families face more demands but less support than ever, the time parents have to prepare food is shrinking.

At the same time that cooking has become more complicated, cultural expectations about cooking have risen. Today, parents (especially mothers) are encouraged to produce healthy and delicious meals that expose children to diverse flavors and textures and rely on ingredients that protect animals, workers, and ecosystems. **These expectations place parents in an unmanageable situation and regularly leave parents feeling guilty and inadequate.**

Families with few financial resources face particular challenges when navigating these tensions because they tend to work in jobs with longer, less flexible, and more unstable hours and are less able to purchase time-saving tools or technologies. They also are less likely to be able to access whole, unprocessed foods.

WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

The disjuncture between expectations and reality adds stress to the experience of cooking, yet home cooking is also deeply ingrained in American value systems; most people want to cook more at home. For this to happen sustainably, families ultimately need better supports from governments and employers in the form of access to affordable childcare, paid sick leave, and vacation time. **However, research also suggests a few strategies that families can adopt to help them cook more regularly at home:**



1. SHARE THE LOAD.

No one person is an island, and this is also true for cooking. Distributing responsibility for cooking between household members – especially spouses - can ensure that cooking doesn't always fall on one person. Older children can also be a valuable resource in the kitchen once they have a little practice. Some families also participate in “meal exchanges” where a group of friends or neighbors each cook a big batch of one meal and distribute it amongst themselves. The rise of mutual aid networks during the pandemic has also provided a successful, tangible model for distributing the load of family food provisioning among communities.

2. PLAN AHEAD.

Taking a few minutes every week to plan what your family will eat that week saves time and money and avoids wasted food. Making a grocery list and shopping for everything you need for the week saves time you would otherwise spend running to the grocery store every other day. Anything that you can do to prepare ahead can help during those hectic weekday moments where you need to throw something together quickly.

3. MAKE IT FUN.

Evidence indicates that simple things like turning on music or a podcast, or sipping a favorite beverage while cooking can cheaply and easily turn a daily chore into something a little more special.

4. DRAW ON SUPPORT.

No one cooks from scratch all the time. Knowing that it's okay to sometimes turn to pre-prepared items, meal kits, deliveries or community meals, or not to cook at all, can help make cooking feel less like a chore and leads people to cook at home more often in the long run. In other words, people are more likely to regularly cook at home when they feel like it is a choice rather than a burden.

SOME ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

<https://beltmag.com/coronavirus-covid-19-mutual-aid-rust-belt/>

<http://familyresiliency.illinois.edu/resources/mealtime-minutes>

<http://familyresiliency.illinois.edu/resources/frc-recipes>

EVIDENCE BASE (SELECTED)

Oleschuk, M. (2021). Expanding the joys of cooking: How class shapes the emotional work of preparing family meals. *Gender, Work & Organization*. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12599>

Trubek, A. B., Carabello, M., Morgan, C., & Lahne, J. (2017). Empowered to cook: The crucial role of ‘food agency’ in making meals. *Appetite*, 116, 297-305.

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