



# All about knives

## Safety tips for teachers

### A bit about knives

The best and safest way for children to learn to use a knife is by using a real knife.

Teaching children knife skills with regular eating knives or plastic knives can instil bad habits, and these can be difficult to shake off later on – these knives require the children to apply more weight and pressure when chopping, which increases the risk of slipping or sliding. A blunt knife can cause exactly the same problem, so it is equally important to ensure that knives are always sharp.

Any cooking done with younger children should focus on touching, smelling, and tasting, with knives only being introduced once the teachers feel confident in each child's abilities – this should be decided on a case by case basis. In our experience, seven years old is around the right age to start learning knife skills.

Children should begin with a 3-inch paring knife. Then, when you feel they're ready, they can move on to a 5-inch chef's knife. Remember, this is a guide: each child will be different and will always need close supervision.

When working with young cooks, we recommend that there should be at least one adult present for every four children – the right level of supervision is absolutely key when using sharp knives.

The following general knife safety tips should be kept in mind to encourage safety and best practice.

### General knife safety tips

- ★ Always start by securing the chopping board with a silicone mat or damp cloth to stop it from slipping while you work.
- ★ Never wave a knife in the air.
- ★ Keep the knife handle clean – if you get grease or oil on it, stop immediately, wash it off and dry the handle to ensure a good grip at all times.
- ★ If the ingredient being chopped is round or uneven, slice a small bit off to create a flat, stable surface to lay on the board while cutting.
- ★ Always chop flat-side down.
- ★ Never chop quickly – work slowly and steadily, and get to know the knife – practice makes perfect.
- ★ Once finished with a knife, either clean it and put it away immediately, or put it somewhere where others can see it. The worst place to leave a knife is in a sink of soapy water or hidden among other things – if anyone puts their hand into the sink to wash something up, they stand a good chance of cutting themselves. Children should not help to wash up knives.
- ★ Keep the knives sharp – as already mentioned, a blunt knife can do more damage than a sharp one.
- ★ Always hold a knife using your dominant (writing) hand.

### Techniques for children

These safe knife skills can be used with lots of different ingredients and encourage best practice. The teacher should always demonstrate before letting the children have a go, explaining clearly and showing them the techniques every time a recipe is demonstrated. Ask the children to show you their technique before allowing them to continue.

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Large or awkward items, such as onions, swede, turnip, butternut squash, pineapples and mangos should be cut down into smaller, more manageable pieces by an adult before passing them to the children. It's still important to make a point of showing children the whole ingredient before cutting it down, because many children may not have seen it before, and might not know what it looks like.

### Bridge

★ The bridge technique is used to cut ingredients into smaller, more manageable pieces.

Form a bridge over the ingredient with your hand, making the arch is nice and high so there's plenty of room for the knife to fit underneath. Hold the item securely with your fingers on one side and your thumb on the other. Now pick up the knife with the other hand – get the children to check the blade is facing downwards – and guide the knife under the middle of the bridge.

Cut into the middle of the ingredient by pressing down and sliding the knife back towards you out of the bridge. Then take one half at a time and place them flat-side down. Repeat the bridge over each half one at a time and cut into quarters. Keep going until you've got the number of pieces you need.

Never rush – it's important to take your time – stop between each slice to check your fingers are out of the way.

### Claw

★ The claw technique is used to slice ingredients into strips.

Place the item onto the board, flat-side down. Make a claw by partly curling your fingers closely together, making sure you tuck your finger tips and thumb out of the way.

Pick up the knife with your other hand, check the blade is facing down and place your claw on top of the ingredient, with your fingers facing the knife. Keep the tip of the knife on the board and slowly slice through the item, sliding the knife back towards you. To make your next slice, move your fingers back along the item, keeping your fingers together and keeping a grip on the top. Remember, stop between slices to look at where your knife is and make sure your fingers are tucked out of the way – it's not a race.

When children are learning, don't encourage them to chop all the way to the end of the item – it's better to have safe fingers than get that extra bit of carrot or celery.

### Cross chop

★ The cross-chop technique is used to finely chop vegetables or herbs.

To begin, cut your vegetable or herb into rough pieces, using the techniques above. Hold the knife firmly in one hand, place the tip of the knife on the board at an angle of roughly 20 degrees. Keep the fingers of your other hand rigid on the top edge of the lower half of the blade. Keeping the tip of the knife on the board, raise and lower the handle of the knife like a guillotine so it chops whatever is under it.

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It's tempting to want to slice really quickly, but it's better to work slowly and get to know your knife. Practice makes perfect!

As you chop, stuff will tend to fly all over the board, so every now and again use the knife as a scraper to bring it all back into the middle. You can use the knife to pick up whatever you're chopping, to save your hands getting dirty, but you need to be extra careful.

## Peeling

Always peel downwards and not towards your body, holding the item on the chopping board and not in the air. For long items, like a carrot or parsnip, hold them at the top and peel to the middle, turning it as you go. Then, turn the item upside down and repeat the process. It is also a good idea to slice a flat surface into wobbly or round items before you start peeling, because this creates a more secure surface to work from.

Jamie recommends using Y-shaped peelers because they have long handles that keep little fingers well away from the blade.

## Grating

Children love grating and can get very carried away with it, so when they are developing grating skills it's important to teach them not to rush. As with peeling, teach children to always grate downwards. You should also instruct them to hold thick, fat pieces and not to grate all the way to the end of the item, but to leave a little bit to hold on to. This reduces the risk of them cutting themselves on the blades. Graters can be just as sharp as knives, so it is important to highlight this to the children.

Jamie suggests that box graters with handles are the best option for children, because they can be placed securely on a chopping board and held with a firm grip.

If using a microplane grater, hold it firmly by the handle and make sure the base of it is flat against a chopping board to hold it steady. Move the food you're grating against the grater, rather than moving the grater itself. Remember to be careful of fingers because microplane graters can be very sharp.

