

## All in the Family: Smart Strategies for Kid- and Parent- Friendly Cooking

By Melissa d'Arabian

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*The host of Food Network's [Ten Dollar Dinners](#) shares smart strategies for kid- and parent-friendly cooking (including [mac and cheese](#)!).*

At a birthday party a couple of years ago, my daughter Charlotte offered me a bite of a sugary, overfrosted cupcake—classic kid food. When I declined (did I grimace?), she asked, “Mommy, why do you ask us to try foods you like, but you won’t try what we like?” This was an entirely fair question.

I believe in making one meal the whole family can eat together, and I often encourage my four girls to try unfamiliar dishes (“You might love spinach salad!”). But I’d been so

busy coaxing my kids over the bridge to my world that I was ignoring theirs. I served one meal—my meal—to the whole family. But I know I’m most successful when I meet my children where they are, not where I want them to be.

I’m not crazy about the term “kid food” in the first place. It contributes to an us-versus-them mentality. If I want to smash the barrier between kid food and adult food, the bridge needs to go both ways. Getting my daughters to accept me into their world actually enables me to guide them slowly into mine. At the dinner table, I now incorporate some of my children’s favorites as a side dish to a healthy meal—like tiny quesadilla triangles served alongside a lovely roasted chicken, with tomato soup for dunking.

Another strategy I use is to take a kids’ classic, like macaroni and cheese, and slowly transform the dish into an adult-friendly, healthier version that everyone feels good about eating. I reduce the fat and use whole grain pasta (try multigrain if your family isn’t ready for whole wheat). Then I deploy my secret weapon for uniting adult and child: a toppings bar with nutritional options like sautéed mushrooms, chopped tomatoes, chopped turkey bacon, or steamed peas and spinach.

A toppings bar has so many advantages: It gets the kids used to having unfamiliar foods on the table with no pressure (toppings are optional); it adds color to the table; it lets parents model healthier choices; and it associates a dish the kids love (mac and cheese) with ingredients they might otherwise resist (peas).

You can even try the invite-a-friend ploy: Poll your kids’ friends’ parents to find out what healthy foods they like. Then invite one of them over for mac and cheese and add one of their favorite healthy ingredients to the toppings bar. It’s amazing what a little positive peer pressure can do!

Our dinner table is meant to be a place of unity. One shared meal sends the message that we’re all on the same team. My dream is for my girls to grow up ready to face the world, knowing they have a safe place to land. I imagine a daughter coming home from her first year in college and instinctively pulling up a chair to the dinner table to tell me all about it. Is that too tall an order for mac and cheese alone? Yes. But the biggest cathedrals are built stone by stone, over many years. And the truth is, we have to lay the small stones along with the big ones, trusting that in 20 years, we’ll step back and see the amazing results.

# Family-Friendly Mac and Cheese with Toppings Bar

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Serves: 10 as a side; 6 as a main

Active Time: 25 minutes

Total Time: 40 minutes

## INGREDIENTS

Nonstick cooking spray  
1 (1-lb) box whole-grain penne pasta  
2 cups low-fat milk  
3 Tbsp unsalted butter  
½ onion, finely chopped  
1 garlic clove minced  
3 Tbsp flour  
1 tsp sweet paprika  
1 pinch cayenne pepper  
¾ cup chicken stock  
1 tsp salt, plus more for pasta water  
1 slice American cheese, torn into small pieces  
3 Tbsp low-fat cream cheese  
¼ cup grated Swiss cheese  
1 tsp Dijon mustard  
1 cup grated sharp cheddar cheese, divided

## Toppings bar—pick and choose from these easy options:

Shredded roasted chicken  
Mild green salsa  
Plain Greek yogurt  
Chopped tomatoes  
Crumbled blue cheese  
Steamed peas  
Shallots sautéed in olive oil  
Mushrooms sautéed in olive oil with garlic and lemon  
Roasted roma tomatoes  
Steamed spinach with garlic  
Chopped crisp turkey bacon

## DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 425°F. Liberally mist a 3-quart casserole dish with nonstick vegetable oil spray and set aside. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add penne and cook according to package instructions, until pasta is al dente. Drain and return penne to pot.
2. Warm milk in microwave. Melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add onion and cook until soft and just golden, about 6 minutes. Add garlic and cook another minute. Stir in flour, paprika, and cayenne and cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Slowly whisk in warm milk. Add chicken stock and cook, stirring frequently with a wooden spoon, until sauce is thick and coats the back of a spoon, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat.
3. Stir in salt, American cheese, and cream cheese, until cream cheese melts. Mix in Swiss cheese, mustard, and ½ cup cheddar. Stir sauce into penne and pour into prepared dish. Top with remaining ½ cup cheddar. Bake until top is golden, 8 to 10 minutes. Serve warm with a couple (or more!) of toppings.

## KITCHEN COUNTER

Per serving (for 6): 510 calories, 67g carbs, 20g protein, 18g fat, 50mg cholesterol, 840mg sodium, 7g fiber

Per serving (for 10): 310 calories, 40g carbs, 12g protein, 11g fat, 30mg cholesterol, 500mg sodium, 4g fiber