

INNOVATE

This Company Helps Kids Learn to Cook. Here's How That Solves Two Huge Problems

Mastering food can help kids form the strong bonds they need for a successful life.



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CREDIT: Courtesy Young Chefs Academy

When Julie Burleson prepares to teach, she doesn't reach for the usual handouts or office and craft supplies. Her tools? Think more along the lines of pans, aprons and a slew of tasty (and usually healthy) foods.

Burleson is the CEO and Founder of [Young Chefs Academy](#), a national cooking school franchise that, while offering some family and adult options, focuses specifically on kids. All the monthly-themed classes, camps, parties and field trips are totally interactive, letting both girls and boys of virtually any

age learn kitchen safety and techniques like knife skills, pureeing, checking oil temperature and baking.

Why does this even work?

On the surface, Young Chefs Academy seems like a bit of an anomaly. After all, home economics classes in schools? Poof, gone, a thing of yesteryear. And don't people just use Doordash or drive-thrus most of the time?

Yep. But thanks to the Internet, people are also more connected and informed than before. Millennial parents, who are both environmentally and health conscious, *know* they--and their kids--aren't as kitchen savvy or independent as earlier generations. They *know* how many problems this creates, and they want to empower themselves and children to break those undesirable trends. Thus, there's been a resurgence in people trying to make meals at home, even if individuals are relying on meal kit and similar services to get their feet wet and find time.

Burleson summarizes the situation:

"Parents are more receptive to children's cooking classes now because, unfortunately, obesity is at an all-time high and technology is constantly interrupting precious family time. Studies show children are more likely to eat healthy foods when they prepare them, and cooking from scratch is heavily incorporated into our curriculum.

"Additionally, it's every family's goal to talk about their days around the dinner table to improve communication. It's proven that families who share meals together on a regular basis have better mental health and the child has better grades in school. When children help prepare home-cooked meals, they aren't perched up in their bedrooms, tucked away with technology. [Instead, they're] involved, helping to extend family time."

In fact, the need for family time is what first inspired the business. When Burleson's son begged to help as she completed a catering order at home, Burleson tried out the cooking school concept at a local restaurant.

That first class was filled to capacity. Now, Young Chef's Academy boasts 225,000 students a year. Four new locations are set to open within the next six months, with 20 more coming in the following year. The company also enjoyed 26 percent per unit growth in revenue from 2016 to 2017.

Dr. Anne Fishel, Associate Clinical Professor at Harvard Medical School, agrees that Burleson has the right idea. She notes that, while kids usually aren't aware of the studies showing the benefits of regular family dinners, they see cooking as a form of play and experimentation. Teens also like eating with their families rather than with friends or alone and are more likely to talk to their parents at daily

dinners. While cooking classes can't come close to replacing those dinners, they can give kids and parents the skills they need to create them and start the real interpersonal work.

"As children spend more time in virtual worlds, on computers and other gadgets, there is a yearning to do things with real objects, to use one's senses, and to make things with their own hands. Cooking allows children to play, to use touch, smell and taste, and to create something valuable. [...]

"The real benefits of families eating together come from the conversation at the table. While kids can learn valuable life-long skills in cooking classes, it is at home that kids learn to listen to others and to feel valued when they talk about their days and their feelings. With their families, kids may learn the stories about recipes cooked by parents and grandparents, and in sharing those stories feel connected to something bigger than themselves. When children know their families stories, research shows that they are more resilient and have greater self-esteem."

Finding leaders--challenge accepted

Burleson notes that the company still floats through rough waters. The main problem is finding the right potential franchisee owners. She has trouble targeting the ideal candidates, because aside from a culinary passion and desire to positively influence children and families, owners are all over the map in terms of backgrounds, professions and personalities. Still, she says parents are usually thrilled with what their kids learn, and that the company is committed to building skills students will keep and use the rest of their lives.

What direction will you take us?

While Burleson's company fills a practical need like other service-based businesses, it's a good example that *entrepreneurs can build entire business models based not on where a culture is, but where people want it to go*. Each class is meant to educate and change behavior for greater social connection and stability. That's a very different vision than, say, making a robotic puppy. So as you try to come up with new business ideas on your own, don't just ask yourself what problem you can solve. Ask yourself how you want yourself and others to be, too.