



Healthier eating habits through engagement at community cooking classes

BEST PRACTICE CASE: A GUIDE FOR CREATING HEALTHIER COOKING HABITS

Inclusive cookery courses create a sustainable base for better nutrition, quality family time and instil a love for cooking in children (and their fathers!). Learn how a food association called Hello Kitchen has addressed health inequality in Copenhagen, and 30 municipalities across Denmark, through its community cookery programmes.

Changing eating habits

Our eating habits are established in childhood and likely continue into adulthood. Healthy food is a key ingredient in a healthy lifestyle, so our children must have the knowledge and skills to buy and prepare healthy food. However, homemade meals are declining in Denmark, and many children are not taught basic cooking skills. Literature shows that 32% of Danes spend less than 15 minutes cooking dinner, and 41% spend 15–30 minutes.¹ One in four meals is not homemade.² On a typical evening, only one in ten families involve their children in preparing the food.² Nearly half of all parents (46%), find that they do not have the time to let children join in, and 33% don't want to involve their children in cooking³ - even though more than half of the children would like to help prepare meals, and 73% say they enjoy cooking.³

Unhealthy eating may increase the risk of developing obesity, and type 2 diabetes. In Denmark, 17.7% of adults over the age of 16 have self-assessed as having unhealthy eating habits, and 52.6% are overweight or have obesity (BMI > 25).⁴ These conditions are particularly prevalent among men and people with lower levels of education.⁴ Between 10–25% of Danish children and young people are overweight or severely overweight, and it is estimated that up to 70% of overweight children remain overweight as adults. Additionally, less than one-third of children and young people aged 4–18 follow the official Danish dietary guidelines for fruit, vegetable, and wholegrain intake.⁵ Health inequalities also affect children and young people, as those whose parents have shorter education are less likely to eat healthily and those with parents from the most disadvantaged groups have the highest incidence of obesity.⁵

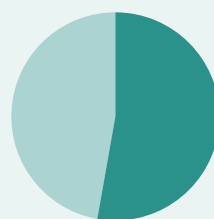
Hello Kitchen – Creating healthier communities through inclusive cooking

Hello Kitchen - the association for food appreciation and community (Hello Kitchen – *foreningen for madglæde og fællesskaber*) develops and offers cookery courses for, among others, families with children. These courses strengthen communities and equip parents with the



1/10 families

involve their children in preparing the food on a typical evening²



53% of children

would like to help prepare meals³



73%

nearly three quarters of children in Denmark say they enjoy cooking³

skills and knowledge to make healthier food with their children. They also encourage children to feel confident in the kitchen, show them the joys of cooking, and educate them about food as a foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating habits. Hello Kitchen is a non-profit organisation that offers these courses in collaboration with Danish municipalities.

Two of Hello Kitchen's cookery courses, designed in collaboration with the health administrations of participating municipalities, aim to reduce health inequalities. The focus is on men and socially disadvantaged groups. The first is called **Dad's Cookery School** (*Fars Køkkenskole*) for fathers and their children, and the second is called **The Family Kitchen** (*Familiekøkkenet*) for families in disadvantaged residential areas.



Dad's Cookery School

Dad's Cookery School was established in 2012 to address unhealthy eating habits and high rates of obesity among Danish men. In collaboration with 30 municipalities and three institutions across Denmark, Hello Kitchen has successfully conducted the programme for more than 7,500 fathers and children from diverse backgrounds. The results have been remarkable, with participants acquiring new cooking skills and knowledge, strengthening their relationships with their children, and building new connections with other participants.

At Dad's Cookery School, 12 fathers and their children (ages 7-10) make healthy food together at the local school. The course includes five classes over a period of five months. Skilled instructors create a motivating learning environment where fathers and children gain knowledge about healthy ingredients and fun cooking techniques, practical experience in cooking together, and become more motivated to make healthy choices when buying, preparing and eating food.

Teaching at Dad's Cookery School

Dad's Cookery School is built on content and a set of pedagogical principles that have become the cornerstone of all of Hello Kitchen's cookery courses and the driving force behind their success.

At Dad's Cookery School, fathers and children are divided into teams of two fathers and two children, working together to cook and establish new relationships. Each class begins with the instructor introducing the day's dish and demonstrating the teams' first steps to follow. The process is interrupted a few times by "kitchen breaks," during which the instructor humorously communicates with the children about the vegetables and the next steps in the recipe.

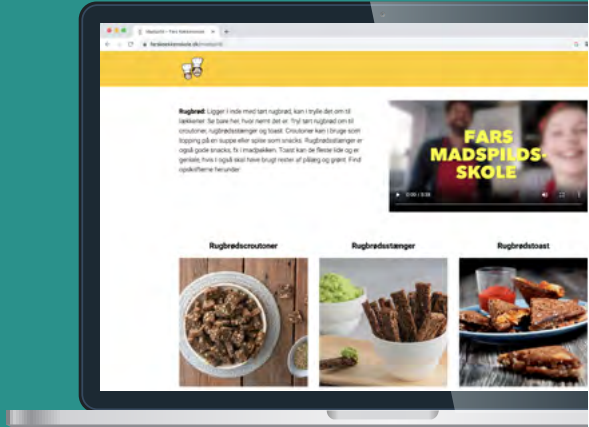
In addition to teaching healthy cooking techniques, the Dad's Cookery School instructor also demonstrates kitchen tricks, particularly for the children, to ensure that everyone can participate equally. For instance, the children are taught how to safely use a large, sharp knife. This empowers the children with important kitchen skills and gives fathers the confidence to involve their children in cooking at home.



Dad's Cookery School emphasises the importance of time, allowing fathers and children to gradually become skilled at working together in the kitchen. The course starts with easy dishes, providing an opportunity for families to get to know each other and the new kitchen tricks. As the course progresses, the demand for collaboration and skill increases. At the end of each class, families enjoy a communal meal, while the second-to-last evening is a dinner party where each family can invite a guest and children take on the role of proud hosts. The programme concludes with the awarding of diplomas.

The instructors at Dad's Cookery School create a safe and playful learning environment where children and fathers feel included and engaged. The focus is on learning through joyful experiences of succeeding in something new. Techniques and methods are repeated throughout the course to allow families to practice their skills.

Dad's Cookery School aims to motivate fathers and children to cook healthy meals at home, using affordable and readily available ingredients that follow official dietary guidelines while also being tasty and child-friendly.



At Dad's Cookery School, fathers and children are provided with recipes and can find more inspiration on the website: farskoekkenskole.dk

Denmark's Official Dietary Guidelines – good for health and climate⁶

Denmark's Official Dietary Guidelines, published in January 2021, guide Danes on how to eat healthier and also on how to eat more climate-friendly.

The Official Dietary Guidelines - good for health and climate are:

- Eat plant-rich, varied and not too much
- Eat more vegetables and fruit
- Eat less meat – choose legumes and fish
- Eat wholegrain foods
- Choose vegetable oils and low-fat dairy products
- Eat less sweet, salty and fatty food
- Thirsty? Drink water



[Access The Official Dietary Guidelines](#)

Results from Dad's Cookery School

External evaluation reports on Dad's Cookery School from 2014⁷, 2017⁸, and 2021⁹ have yielded very positive conclusions. The programme is seen as attractive and meaningful, contributing to healthy food experiences for both fathers and children. It has successfully reached fathers from diverse social groups, promoting interest and skills in healthy cooking and creating informal and appealing environments that make it fun and motivating for fathers to engage with healthy food and cooking.

Dad's Cookery School participants have gained more than just skills in healthy and communal cooking; they have developed stronger relationships with their children and other families. The social aspects of the courses are a driving force in getting fathers more interested in healthy food and communal cooking, rather than just a positive side effect, according to evaluations and experiences shared by Hello Kitchen.

The external survey of the participating fathers' self-assessed outcomes immediately after participating in Dad's Cookery School from 2017-2020¹⁰ show that:

Maybe it's a little embarrassing for me to say, but cooking doesn't really appeal to me, but when we did it together at Dad's Cookery School, there was this extra element of something social; cooking went from being a task to being something enjoyable, and that's important to me.

Participant

Dad's Cookery School has contributed to fathers' and children's interest and skills in healthy cooking and has created informal and appealing environments that make it fun and motivating for fathers to engage with healthy food and cooking.

External evaluator, 2017

Fathers and children find it attractive and meaningful to participate together, contributing to healthy food experiences for both. Dad's Cookery School can attract fathers from all social groups and can be used by municipalities and associations to strengthen men's health and cooking skills.

External evaluator, 2014

What the participating fathers say:

99%

were "very satisfied" or "satisfied"

100%

who completed the course would recommend it to others

91%

learned how to involve their child more in cooking

What the participating families say:

88%

participating fathers and children bonded in new ways during the course

77%

of participating families made new friends through Dad's Cookery School

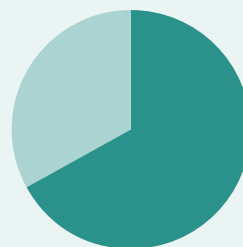
What the participating children say:

93%

tried new dishes and ingredients they hadn't tasted before

89%

become more interested in food and cooking



67%

now eat a wider variety of fruits and vegetables

72%

offer to help with cooking at home after completing Dad's Cookery School



The Family Kitchen

Hello Kitchen offers another programme called The Family Kitchen, which draws heavily from the structure, content, and pedagogy of Dad's Cookery School, but with a different target audience. The Family Kitchen was developed in 2019 as a politically prioritised initiative to address health inequality and poor well-being among families living in public housing areas in Greater Copenhagen. Hello Kitchen collaborated with the municipality and five housing associations to develop and manage the project. The residential areas were characterised by low levels of education, employment, and income and high crime levels compared to other public housing areas.

The objectives of The Family Kitchen programme included creating joy and a sense of community around cooking and communal dining for both parents and children, while also increasing knowledge and skills in preparing climate-friendly, inexpensive, and healthy food.

To ensure the success of The Family Kitchen programme, a pilot project was conducted with the involvement of citizens and social housing employees. This was done to overcome the barriers and challenges faced by the target group, and to ensure that recruitment, learning, and family experiences were optimised.

The pilot project led to the following changes in the programme format:

- The recipes had to be illustrated to accommodate language challenges.
- The social housing employees had an active role in recruiting the most resource-deprived citizens as participants.
- The social housing employees, if possible, should participate in The Family Kitchen to support families and strengthen their relationship with them.

The established format of The Family Kitchen programme involves 10 families, each consisting of a parent and a child (aged 6–10), meeting in the school kitchen of a local public school. They cook together four times every two weeks and learn about healthy foods, seasonal vegetables, and reducing food waste, which is beneficial for both health and the environment and saves money. They also learn fun kitchen tricks so that children and parents become skilled together. The recipes include step-by-step illustrations to create a common language for parents and children while considering language challenges. Younger siblings

are provided with childcare by local youths who gain valuable experiences for the future.

The housing social workers who participated in The Family Kitchen programme would highly recommend it to other housing social organisations because they witnessed its positive impact on parents and children and between families. Additionally, the programme provided natural opportunities for the social workers to have contact with residents about “something nice and lovely,” making it easier to address difficult conversations around job situations, family problems and dialogues with authorities.

The project concluded in December 2022, and the recipe book and videos have been shared in a network of 54 municipalities.¹⁰

I have done so much! I removed the pumpkin seeds, chopped vegetables, kneaded dough, rolled grissini (breadsticks), peeled onions, peeled garlic, cleaned up, and did the dishes. I will tell my dad everything when I get home. He will also taste my pumpkin soup.

Participating child

The children were really happy with the vegetables, even at home where I don't normally cook with so many vegetables... I think they liked the vegetables better because they had been involved in the cooking process.

Participant parent

The Family Kitchen programme had 350 participating families and was evaluated by an external evaluator with positive results. A satisfaction survey¹⁰ conducted with 30 parents revealed the following:

100%

were more motivated to cook with their child

87%

reported that their child made new friends

100%

were satisfied and would recommend The Family Kitchen to others

93%

gained skills that make it easier for them to involve their child in cooking

89%

were more motivated to cook with seasonal vegetables

87%

were more willing to reduce food waste

100%

were motivated to eat healthier

Advice for starting health-promoting cookery courses

Partnerships

Hello Kitchen found that establishing partnerships with organisations close to the target audience is advantageous for getting the most out of cookery courses. Municipalities, for example, may see the benefit of offering cookery courses as a citizen-focused health service, which can strengthen relationships across generations, cultures and social backgrounds and promote healthier eating habits and food education in children. In most of Hello Kitchen's projects, municipalities co-financed the cookery courses to allow citizens with limited financial resources to participate. Although a cooking course can be organised directly for citizens, this typically requires a high participant fee and/or volunteer instructors.

Recruitment

When recruiting families for cooking classes, it is important to emphasise the community aspect over health. Families are primarily interested in engaging in meaningful activities together, with the benefit of being motivated to cook healthier food. Cooking classes should be held near where people live to make recruiting families easier and keep costs low for those with limited financial resources. However, retaining families from disadvantaged housing areas may require additional effort. Local social coordinators can be important for social activities and health interventions.

Perspective

The cookery courses offered by Hello Kitchen are unique examples of how a hands-on approach and community building can be central to addressing health challenges. This approach can also be applied to other areas, such as encouraging people to be more physically active or enhancing mental well-being through nature-based activities. By prioritising community building and practical engagement, health initiatives can become more effective and engaging for participants.

More inspiration

Hello Kitchen offers assistance to other cities in starting and establishing cookery courses. This includes recipe development, training of coordinators and instructors, hands-on training in the kitchen, manuals, equipment lists, and more. Contact Hello Kitchen for more information or assistance in starting a program.



The association of food appreciation and community

Slagtehusgade 11, 1.
1715 Copenhagen
Denmark

Email: info@helloworldkitchen.dk
Mobile: 27 27 41 14
www.helloworldkitchen.dk

Resources:

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