Thanksgiving with kids in the kitchen: the jobs they can do, by age

Peabody blog · Cooking · updated 2026-10-31

How kids can help with Thanksgiving dinner at 3, 6, 9 and 12, the jobs that stay a grown-up's, a day-of plan, turkey safety from the USDA, and allergy swaps.

Kids can do real work on Thanksgiving: washing, snapping, mashing, measuring, setting the table and decorating. What they can't do is the stove, the knives, the oven and the hot turkey, and on the busiest cooking day of the year it helps to say that before the morning starts. This post sets out which Thanksgiving jobs fit which age, a plan for the day, the kitchen safety rules worth knowing (with the USDA as the source), and the swaps for guests with allergies.

It's for American families: Canada's Thanksgiving was back on 12 October. In the US it's Thursday, 26 November this year.

I'm a parent who built Peabody, a free reading and math site, and its Kitchen has step-by-step recipes read aloud by a tiny chef called Crumb. This week I wrote three Thanksgiving sides for it, and writing them meant deciding, step by step, which jobs are a child's and which are a grown-up's. The full list of recipes is on Thanksgiving recipes for kids. This post is about the jobs.

Thanksgiving jobs for kids, by age

The ages follow the "kids in the kitchen" lists from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the USDA's Team Nutrition, which I went through in cooking with kids by age. Every child is different: a careful five-year-old may be ready for more, and a tired nine-year-old at 4 pm on the day may not.

- Age: 3 to 5 · Jobs they can do on the day: Wash potatoes and vegetables, snap green beans, tear lettuce, stir cold things, count rolls into a basket, put napkins on plates · Where to start: Green beans, a turkey veggie platter
- Age: 6 to 8 · Jobs they can do on the day: Scrub potatoes, measure and pour, mash cooked potatoes once the steam has gone, rinse and sort cranberries, spoon and decorate, set the whole table · Where to start: Mashed potatoes, no-bake pumpkin pie cups
- Age: 9 to 12 · Jobs they can do on the day: Read a recipe aloud and follow it, measure for a whole side dish, make a whole side or dessert with a grown-up doing the hot steps, label the dishes, run the kitchen timer · Where to start: Cranberry sauce, frog eye salad
- Age: A grown-up, always · Jobs they can do on the day: The raw turkey, the oven, the stove, sharp knives, carving, draining boiling water, lifting anything hot · Where to start: Every step marked "A grown-up" in the Kitchen

A few of those jobs are better than they look:

- Snapping green beans is the best job for a three- or four-year-old: it needs no tool, it makes a good noise, and a pile of beans takes long enough to keep them busy while you do something else.
- Mashing is a six-year-old's job, but only after a grown-up has drained the potatoes and the steam has calmed down. In the Kitchen's mashed potatoes that's a three-minute wait, then the butter goes in and melts, and then they mash.
- Sorting cranberries is a good counting and looking job: pick out the soft or brown ones, then bounce a good one on the counter. Fresh cranberries bounce because they have little pockets of air inside.
- Measuring gives a child a job that matters. Half a cup of milk, half a teaspoon of salt: the dish depends on them getting it right. If they like it, kitchen math has more.
- Setting the table is a whole project for a seven-year-old: count the guests, count the forks, fold the napkins, make a place card for everyone.
- Decorating is where the youngest shine: a turkey made of vegetable sticks around a dip bowl, a swirl of whipped cream on each pumpkin cup, a row of leaves cut from paper down the middle of the table.

What stays a grown-up's, at every age

In the Kitchen I made one rule simpler than the age lists: every step with a sharp knife, the stove, the oven or the microwave is a grown-up step, whatever the child's age. Before one of those steps, Crumb says to stop and get a grown-up. On Thanksgiving that list includes the turkey: thawing it, handling it raw, putting it in the oven, lifting it out and carving it.

The day itself is why. The National Fire Protection Association says Thanksgiving is the peak day of the year for home cooking fires. Every burner is on, the oven is full, and there are more people in the kitchen than usual. The NFPA's advice is a "kid-free zone" of at least 3 feet around the stove and wherever hot food or drinks are being made or carried. Mark it with tape on the floor if that helps. A child can still watch from the edge of it and tell you when the pot starts to bubble.

A plan for the day

Spreading the kids' jobs out keeps them busy in short bursts and keeps them out of the kitchen when it's at its hottest. This is roughly how I'd run it for a 4 pm dinner.

1. The day before: make the cranberry sauce. The child rinses, sorts and measures; a grown-up does the boiling. It sets in the fridge overnight and keeps for about a week. Snap the green beans and keep them in a bag in the fridge.
2. Morning: set the table early, before the kitchen gets busy. Make place cards. Build the turkey veggie platter for snacking later (a grown-up cuts the sticks; the child arranges the

feathers).
3. Late morning: make the no-bake pumpkin pie cups. They need no oven and sit in the fridge for 30 minutes, so they're done long before dinner. A kindergartner can do nearly all of it.
4. Midday: a break from the kitchen. The oven is full and the turkey is on its way. This is a good hour for Thanksgiving games or a story from the free library.
5. An hour before dinner: potatoes. The child scrubs; a grown-up peels, cuts, boils and drains; the child mashes once the steam has calmed down.
6. Twenty minutes before: green beans. A grown-up boils and drains them; the child stirs in the butter till they shine.
7. At the table: older kids carry cold dishes only: the cranberry sauce, the platter, the rolls. Hot dishes go with a grown-up.
8. After dinner: a child sets a two-hour timer the moment the meal is served (the kitchen timers work for this). When it rings, the leftovers should already be in the fridge.

Thanksgiving kitchen safety

None of this is medical advice. It's the short list from the USDA's food safety guidance for Thanksgiving, and the CDC's for hand washing.

- Thaw the turkey in the fridge, not on the counter. The USDA says to allow about a day for every 4 to 5 pounds, so a big bird can need four or five days.
- Don't rinse the raw turkey. The USDA advises against it: washing raw poultry splashes germs around the sink and counter, and cooking kills them anyway. Keep the raw turkey and its board and knife away from anything that won't be cooked, like the veggie platter.
- Cook the turkey to 165°F (74°C), checked with a food thermometer in the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the thigh and the innermost part of the wing. The colour of the meat and the pop-up button aren't enough. Stuffing cooked inside the bird must reach 165°F too; cooking it in its own dish is easier.
- Leftovers go in the fridge within 2 hours of the meal coming out of the oven, and the USDA says to eat them within 3 to 4 days.
- Hand washing: the CDC's steps are wet, lather, scrub for at least 20 seconds, rinse and dry. Everyone washes before cooking, and grown-ups wash again straight after touching the raw turkey. Kids like to time it: "Happy Birthday" sung twice is about right.
- For little ones under 4, the American Academy of Pediatrics' choking list matters on a day of snacks. Cut cooked green beans short, cut grapes in half the long way, and leave raw cranberries, nuts and popcorn out of their reach.

Allergy swaps for Thanksgiving sides

The FDA names nine major food allergens in the US: milk, egg, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soy and sesame. Thanksgiving tables usually have milk in the potatoes, butter on the beans and wheat in the stuffing, rolls and pie crust. Ask your guests ahead, and then:

- Mashed potatoes without milk: oil in place of the butter and oat milk in place of the milk. The Kitchen's mashed potatoes swap both when you pick "No milk".
- Green beans without milk: a little oil in place of the butter.
- Cranberry sauce is cranberries, sugar, water and orange juice: none of the nine major allergens.
- Pumpkin pie cups without wheat: gluten-free graham crackers for the crumbs.
- The veggie platter dip without milk: an oat yogurt in place of the yogurt.

Make the allergy-free dish first, with its own spoon, and keep it covered. A child can make a little card for each dish saying what's in it, which helps guests and is a good writing job for a seven-year-old. Packet foods change, so read every label, and a family managing a serious allergy should follow their doctor's plan. There's more in nut-free, allergy-friendly snacks kids can make.

The Kitchen is free for the rest of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up, and nothing your child picks or makes in it is sent anywhere.

Questions parents ask

How can kids help with Thanksgiving dinner?

Give them the cold, careful jobs: washing and scrubbing vegetables, snapping green beans, measuring, mashing cooked potatoes, sorting cranberries, setting the table and decorating the desserts. Keep the stove, the oven, knives and the turkey for a grown-up.

What can a 4-year-old do on Thanksgiving?

Snap green beans, wash potatoes, put napkins and rolls out, and arrange vegetable sticks into a turkey on a plate. Short jobs work best, with a break from the kitchen while the oven is busy.

Can kids help with the turkey?

Not with the raw or the hot turkey. Raw poultry can carry Salmonella, and the oven, the roasting pan and the carving knife are all grown-up jobs. A child can read the thermometer out loud once a grown-up has put it in: 165°F means it's done.

Which Thanksgiving dishes can kids make the day before?

Cranberry sauce is the best one: it keeps in the fridge for about a week and sets firmer as it chills. Snapped green beans keep in a bag in the fridge overnight, and no-bake pumpkin pie cups can be made a few hours ahead.

How long can Thanksgiving leftovers sit out?

No more than 2 hours, says the USDA, and then they go in the fridge in shallow containers. Eat them within 3 to 4 days.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-kids-can-help-with-thanksgiving-dinner