

Research tells us that eating round the table as a family is becoming a thing of the past. To me, the kitchen or dining table is where it's at: it's the family boardroom, where decisions are made, problems solved, manners taught and communication skills developed.

These days, many activities within a family are often fragmented: Dad taking son to football or rugby, Mum taking daughter swimming or riding. Time is rarely on the side of joint participation. How many parent-teacher evenings, prize-givings or carol services have I missed because of work? Too many. However, at least once a day, I try to get everyone around the table for a bite to eat and a good old natter.

Although time is in short supply, I would urge you to cook your meals from scratch to enable your children to enjoy a healthy and balanced diet. I have used ready meals on occasions, especially when my children are left in the care of a babysitter, but looking at the sugars, salts, fats and additives many contain, I feel I am doing my children a disservice.

Cooking from scratch doesn't need to take long, as I'm about to show you. I've got a feeling that you're going to say, 'But it's easy for you – you're a chef! It'll take me twice as long.' Well, my family tested cooking many of these recipes and found they could cook them in the time indicated. Like most things in life, if you want to cook well, the key is good organization, and that means good preparation. Throughout the book, the word 'meanwhile' appears regularly in the recipe methods; please don't ignore it, since it is used to mean that while you're simmering, boiling, frying, etc, you should be moving on to the next task, so that two stages are happening at the same time.

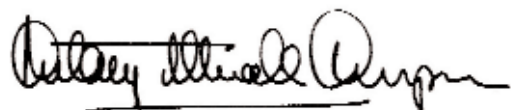
Cooking is all about confidence. Don't overextend yourself. If you want to cheat a little (and Delia has made it all the rage),

please feel free. Use that ready-prepared veg, buy some ready-made sauces – I don't care too much. The priority is for you to get into the kitchen, to cook simple, good, honest family food and to forget about trying to cook like a chef. Just concentrate on being a real parent.

That said, I've resisted the temptation to include recipes even faster than those in this book because I really want you to cook rather than open too many packets or cans. However, to help, under many recipes I've given you a handy hint, which often contains a little cheating advice.

Finally, while the health aspect of family food is important, it should never be the overriding factor. Children and adults alike must be allowed to enjoy their food without the food police hovering over their shoulders tut-tutting every time they eat something naughty. Health is about balance and about eating a wide range of ingredients with no food groups excluded. As a parent, you know whether your children are overweight or fighting fit, and you can therefore decide whether to give them that pudding or that extra bowl of chips. But always remember: if you are eating more calories than you're burning off through exercise or activities, you are going to get fat. Simple fact, simple cure.

The main thing is to enjoy my food. This is real family food produced quickly; you won't find any towers, swirls of foam or reduced balsamic vinegar, and I haven't used any ingredients that you can't buy in the supermarkets, either. I hope you'll enjoy my book and discover deliciously simple food. I've enjoyed writing it, I've enjoyed preparing the recipes and I've enjoyed eating the results. Go wild in your kitchen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Delia Allread". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.