Kids’ camp combines cooking with reading, math, other skills

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For the AJC

That dreaded “summer slide,” when kids forget lessons learned throughout the school year, is at bay this year at a new educational camp in Dunwoody. While there’s still time for swimming and recreation, the Cook by the Book session at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta is keeping kids on track by combining the fun of cooking with the skills of reading and math.

The brainchild of MJCCA Culinary and Arts Coordinator Howard Schreiber, Cook by the Book has kids between 4 and 7 years old spending each day reading a book that has a culinary connection: “Give a Mouse a Cookie” and “Dragons Love Tacos” are two of the selections. Schreiber came up with the reading list after consulting two family experts.

“My sister is a preschool teacher, and my mom is an English teacher and reading specialist,” said Schreiber. “When I first came up with the idea, I was a little unsure about making it work. But once we sat down to talk about it, we came up with a list of 60 books that would work.”

Last year, Schreiber ran a pilot program around the idea to see if it was feasible with kids who often are able to read. “But the kids really got into it, and that made me realize we could make it work for a whole week,” he said.

In other cooking classes he has led, Schreiber has incorporated some educational component, be it about geography or culture. This camp goes even farther, said Nora Brown, whose 6-year-old son, Oliver, whipped up potato latkes, applesauce, cookies and more goodies at a recent camp session.

“This camp introduces not just reading but math and the science of cooking,” said Brown, who is a preschool teacher who lives in Dunwoody. “They’re having a great time and having the regular camp experiences, but this brings some of that educational aspect in, and that’s often hard to do in the summer.”

The sessions start off with Schreiber holding a team meeting, just as chefs in real restaurants do. The campers talk about the book of the day and what they’ll be making. Much of the time revolves around hands-on cooking with standard kitchen equipment in the center’s culinary studio, outfitted with several spacious cooking islands.

“They usually sit on stools so they can reach the counter tops, but we don’t use kid-sized utensils; we use the same things they’ll have at home,” said Schreiber. “The goal is for them to go home and cook with their parents.”

The combination of cooking and reading works even with kids who can’t read yet. Brown added, “Oliver is going into first grade, so he’s not proficient, so combining the chance to read with food is a great idea.”

But what the kids appreciate most, Brown believes, is getting to make and eat the goodies they create.

“The first day, Oliver ate so much, he had to lay down,” said Brown. “The next day, I asked him to bring me a cookie, and he said he wasn’t sure he could do that. He’s having a great time.”

Information about upcoming Cook by the Book sessions is online at www.atlantajcc.org.