Nutrition education is learning about foods and how foods are important to health. Nutrition education activities should be age appropriate and fun. Children will stay involved longer if they are having fun. Nutrition education should be a part of child care because it helps children
• feel good about food and eating.
• enjoy a wide variety of foods.
• learn healthful eating habits early in life.

Tips for Nutrition Education in Child Care

Get children involved in activities around food and eating. Children are natural explorers. They are constantly asking questions and discovering the world around them. Children learn through their play and through hands-on activities. Think of ways you can provide learning activities that engage the children’s senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and seeing. Allow children to handle food—mix it, prepare it, smell it, and taste it. Help them learn to describe foods as they see them—their color, shape, and texture.
Plan activities that match the children’s abilities and interests.
Children develop rapidly from 2–4 years of age. Activities should take into consideration the children’s developmental readiness. This includes both
• what the children are mentally ready to learn and
• what they are physically able to do.

Younger children are not able to perform the same tasks as older children. When planning a nutrition education activity, think about the age of the children. Almost any activity can be changed to fit the abilities and the interests of the children being taught.

Plan simple activities before harder ones.
Children, like adults, want to be successful in what they do. You can help children be successful by first planning activities that are simple and then progressing to harder ones. For example, to involve children in food preparation, start by introducing them to some very simple cooking activities. Once the children learn the basic rules of cooking, they will be ready for more challenging activities.

Build on what children already know.
Children learn new things by building on things they already know. When you introduce a new topic about food and eating, connect it to something already familiar to them. For example, many children understand that gasoline makes a car go. Relate this to foods that enable children to go (and grow), so they can play hard. The children will be able to connect the ideas that both gasoline and food are examples of fuel.
Be ready to use teachable moments to help children learn about food and eating. A teachable moment is a time when children are ready
• to learn something new or
• to make connections with something you have already discussed or done.

For more information review the CARE Connection grab-and-go lesson, How to Use the Teachable Moment.