

FAMILY-BASED NUTRITION CLASSES

A Guide for Nutrition Educators



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Family-based nutrition classes can be a great way to help families work together to plan, shop, fix, and eat healthy meals. A family-based class can take several forms, but the important thing is that they bring parents and children together to learn about and practice healthy cooking and eating skills. This guide was designed to be used as part of a regular series of nutrition education classes, such as SNAP-Ed, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), Faithful Families Thriving Communities, or other community nutrition education programs. It's important to take time to plan the family-based classes well in advance of their start in order to be sure that participants get the most from the experience. Before you get started with a family-based class, here are some things to consider:

WHO should come? How will you recruit participants for a family-based class? Will you work with an existing organization, like a faith community, or will you recruit participants from a partner organization, like a health clinic?

WHAT should you cover? There are lots of topics you could cover in family-based classes. If you are able to, ask your class or group for their input. What are they interested in learning? What questions or concerns do they have about getting children involved in cooking? What particular challenges do they have when cooking at home that you might address?

WHERE will you host the classes? If there is space and you are working with an organization, you might want to hold the class on-site. Consider transportation for your participants, and select a location that meets their needs. Is there a location on the bus line? Or one that's within walking distance to their home or community organization? Depending on what types of foods you prepare, you might need access to a kitchen or refrigerator. Be sure to consider that when planning space.

WHEN to host the classes? Talk with participants or the host organization about the best times for parents and children to meet. For example, if you are working with mothers of preschoolers, you might consider early afternoon classes to accommodate nap schedules. Or, if you are working with school-aged children whose parents work, evening hours might be best. Similarly, if teaching at a faith community, you might consider asking if you can meet on a day when people will already be gathered for worship or educational programming.

HOW should you structure the classes? Will you focus on helping children to learn about new foods and cooking with their parents or will you structure time so that youth and parents are separated? The age of children participating and the interests of adults will have some impact on this decision.

WHY family classes? We have learned from EFNEP Program Assistants who have done family-based classes that these classes are a great way to get kids involved in cooking and eating healthy foods.



A smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt, is standing in a kitchen. She is using a knife to chop orange carrots on a wooden cutting board. To her left are a red and a yellow bell pepper, and to her right is a head of green broccoli. The background is a blurred kitchen interior.

Find local partners

Family-based classes work well when they are a collaboration of several local partners. You will need, at minimum, one person to work with the adults and one person to work with the children. These partners might include:

- 4-H Agents or Youth Program Assistants
- ECA or other Cooperative Extension volunteers
- Health educators from the local health department
- Nutrition educators, from SNAP-Ed, EFNEP, Faithful Families, or another program
- Educators from local organizations that work with youth, like the Boys and Girls Club or YMCA
- University students

To find a listing of local Cooperative Extension staff in North Carolina, visit this link:
www.ces.ncsu.edu/local-county-center

Once you have a team on board to work with you on the family-based classes, talk through the questions above, including the *who*, *what*, *when*, *how* and *where* questions. As your team makes a plan, you might work through the following steps to implement your classes:

1. PLAN your classes. Sit down with your team and talk about your goals for the class. What would you like participants to do or learn? How will you accomplish program goals? Based on conversations with EFNEP staff who have targeted families of children 9-12 years of age, we have learned that it helps to start with the adults and children together, for some basic information. Then have the groups split, with the adult educator providing a lesson for the adults, and the youth educator providing a variation on the same lesson for children. Then, the groups come back together to watch a food demonstration OR prepare food together. You can also include a group physical activity! For children younger than 9 years, a different format may help parents with determining appropriate food activities for their child's age.

2. RECRUIT participants. Work with your community partners, or the host organization, to recruit participants for the classes. Consider barriers to participating, like childcare arrangements or transportation, and work with your partners to come up with some solutions or suggestions. Be sure to let participants know what they will get out of the classes—in addition to learning about healthy foods, they will also learn how to get their kids involved in the kitchen! Consider offering childcare for siblings who might be too young to participate, or clarify that they are welcome as well.

3. SHOP for food for the classes. As you work with your team, think about which recipes from *Cooking with EFNEP*—or another tested recipe source—would work best for your group. Consider their cultural background, cooking skill set, cooking equipment at home, and preferences as you are planning the food. Also think about recipes that will be kid-friendly. *Cooking with EFNEP* has some great ideas and suggestions to help you get kids in the kitchen!

4. WORK with volunteers. As you might know, classes that involve more hands-on cooking require additional preparation and planning time. Be sure to recruit volunteers to work with you, to help with some food preparation. For example, volunteers could help you chop food ahead of time, so that you are able to demonstrate the recipe more quickly. They could also be on-hand to work with families during the cooking time, so that families have additional support if they have questions.



5. COMMUNICATE regularly with your team, before, during, and after the classes. Regular communication is key to making family-based classes work. You will want to meet or talk each week to discuss who will do what during the class sessions. Some questions you will want to discuss include: Who will purchase the food? Who will lead the food demonstration/cooking portion? Who will lead the physical activity? How will you divide your time this week between cooking and adult/youth programming? What activities do we want families to experience together? What concepts need to be separated between youth and adult groups? It is crucial that your team work together to make these classes a success!

6. TEACH your lessons! Look through your lessons and recipes, and find places where you can provide information about cooking together as a family, or ways to get children more involved in cooking or preparing foods. You might focus on different types of cooking skills each week, to help families who might not have much cooking experience feel more comfortable in the kitchen. Some topics you might cover include: measurements, kitchen safety, knife skills, freezer meals, crock pot meals, bulk buying and cooking, and using local foods. Knowing your participants will help you tailor your classes to their needs, wishes, and cultural backgrounds.

7. COOK with the families. Use *Cooking with EFNEP* or another trusted source as your inspiration. If you are cooking as a class, encourage each member of the family to take on a different task in the recipe, to get everyone involved. Plan ahead to be sure you can point out age-appropriate activities to get the children cooking too!

8. CELEBRATE your success. Take photos of your class. Note that some participants may not want to be in the photos; it is important to respect their wishes and to get permission in advance if you do take pictures of participants. Talk with participants following each session and after your classes have ended about any skills or recipes that they learned and are now practicing as a result of the classes. Ask participants to share how what they learned through your classes helped them to make healthy choices. Share any additional resources that can help participants to learn more about topics that interest them. Respond to any questions they have, or help them connect with people or organizations that can assist them.

REMEMBER: Family-based classes worked well when families had the opportunity to cook during the class. If you are planning to cook during your family-based classes, be sure to add time for that! Cooking a meal together takes a good deal of time longer than just a food demonstration. Plan for an additional 30 minutes to an hour for these classes.



Tips for your class

Here are some ideas for activities that other nutrition educators have included in their family-based classes. You will not be able to cover all of these elements in one class! However, you can select a few that fit the needs and interests of your class participants.

Demonstrate food preparation skills that can help families to save time and money. Consider highlighting a different preparation method during each class. For example, one family-based class focused on freezer meals as a strategy to help families get the most from their money, while saving time cooking. The educators for this class recommended addressing multiple strategies (not just freezer meals) so that participants could gain hands-on experience with other methods, like crock pot cooking, one-pot meals, cooking with kids, healthy snacks, etc.

Partner with local organizations or people who can provide additional education around topics that are of interest to the families in your class. For example, you might ask the horticulture agent or a master gardener to come and talk about container gardening. A representative from a local farmers' market could introduce participants to the market and explain how they can use SNAP or WIC benefits there.

Engage the children who come to the classes. It is a good idea to recruit volunteers to help with the children. Encourage your participants to involve their children in preparing family meals and snacks once they get home. Even young children can tear salad greens, shake a homemade dressing, or stir a batter. Remember to consider childcare needs for parents with young children. Consider talking with local 4-H clubs to provide babysitting on-site!

Explore! Encourage participants to bring their cultural foods and experiences into the classes. Ask them to share recipes, and, if needed, talk together about ways to make the recipes healthier. Participants likely have assets and skills related to cooking or growing food that they can share with others in the class. Invite discussion so that everyone can share from their knowledge!



Other Resources

For additional resources or support related to family-based classes, consider:

- **4-H Food Smart Families:**
www.4-h.org/4hfoodsmartfamilies
- **Iowa State 4-H Food and Nutrition:**
www.extension.iastate.edu/4h/projects/foodandnutrition
- **USDA's What's Cooking recipe database:**
www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov
- **Kids in the Kitchen:**
www.nutrition.gov/life-stages/children/kids-kitchen
- **Kitchen Activities for Kids:**
<https://choosemyplate-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/printablematerials/KitchenHelperActivities.pdf>
- **Cooking with Kids:**
<https://healthymeals.fns.usda.gov>





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