Cooking is a popular way to engage children in nutrition education. The caregiver can tailor cooking activities for children of all ages and skill levels. Assign an adult to work with a small number of children at a time when possible.

**Involve children in cooking activities at child care.**
Visit your local public library to find cookbooks for young children. Look for cookbooks with lots of pictures and simple step-by-step instructions.

Check the recipes to be sure they include basic foods, and not a lot of fat, sugar, or sodium (salt). Check to see that foods can be credited as part of a meal or snack on the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meal Patterns.

**Practice the basics.**
While learning to follow a recipe, children learn other basic skills, such as measuring and pouring. Even younger children can help with these tasks.

- Let the children practice their skills by using different size measuring cups and measuring spoons with dried beans or rice that are easy to clean up when spilled. Graduate to measuring and pouring water into a bowl.

- Children can practice stirring and mixing by measuring and pouring different colored dried beans into a bowl and using a spatula to stir them. Be sure to watch carefully so young children do not put beans into their mouths, ears, or noses.

- Take advantage of a pretend kitchen to let children make believe they are cooking before they actually get into a real kitchen.
Follow safety rules for cooking with children.
Before beginning a cooking activity, explain safety rules to the children. It is a good idea to give the children a tour of the kitchen, showing them the utensils and appliances and talking about how to use them safely. Explain that only adults will use the appliances. Remind children to stay away from the stove because it might be hot.

- Wash hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before and after handling food.
- Clean counter tops, utensils, and work surfaces with hot soapy water before you begin and after preparing each food item.
- Keep cold foods in the refrigerator until it is time to prepare them.
- Wash fresh fruits or vegetables, even if they will be peeled or cooked.
- Throw away foods that fall on the floor.
- Do not sneeze or cough near the food. Give children who have colds other activities to do away from the food.
- Use only plastic knives with older children. Younger children should not use any kind of knives or any sharp objects.
- Avoid using electrical appliances in the presence of young children.
- Make sure only adults are at the stove.
- Clean up any spills as soon as they happen.