Engaging Youth in Nutrition Education

Why Learning by Doing is Necessary!

As you design activities, keep in mind that generally we remember

- 10% of what we read
- 20% of what we hear
- 30% of what we see
- 50% of what we hear and see
- 70% of what we say and write
- 90% of what we both say and do

A major way to encourage activities participation is the use of hands-on activities. Hands-on activities enhance motivation by giving participants a sense of involvement with the learning at hand. For example, label reading can be taught in a hands-on way in which participants handle real food packages, containers, and cans (empty) to determine healthful choices. Such an activity is much more motivating than simply lecturing to participants about “how to read a food label.”

When conducting demonstrations, it is effective to have youth come up to perform some aspects of the demonstration activities (e.g., spooning out the amount of fat in various fast foods). This not only provides active participation for some members, but also encourages positive classroom behavior.

Another example of active participation is role playing in which the person enacts the role of someone else by improvising rather than reading a script. Role playing attitudes counter to our own can be a powerful technique in facilitating deliberation and change in our views of ourselves, of other people, and of an advocated viewpoint or behavior.

You can also engage learners in discussion among themselves in twos, threes, or small groups about such topics as why kids generally don’t eat vegetables, why it’s hard for youth to make healthy food choices even when they know better, or how to make food choices in a manner that promotes health when their peers are choosing otherwise.

Facilitated discussion is a commonly used approach to group sessions that fosters active participation. Facilitated discussion is based on dialogue and exchange between the nutrition educator as facilitator of the group and the group participants. It avoids lecturing, instead focusing on open-ended questions, active listening, and respect for the ideas of everyone in the group to promote active participation and weave a meaningful learning experience for all.

Experiential Learning Model

In order to engage learners with their educational experience, nutrition programs promote life-long skill development through use of a five step sequential experiential learning model.

Step 1. EXPERIENCE...the hands-on action step. Youth do their activities before they are shown or told how to do it (or with only the minimum amount of pre-activity instructions). As educators, “do you sit on your hands enough?” Do not rob youth of their discoveries. Youth experiment with new ideas, interests, activities, etc.

Step 2. SHARE...describe what was done.

Step 3. PROCESS...identify common themes and discover what was most important about the nutrition education experience.

Step 4. GENERALIZE...So what? Identify how to use what’s been learned in real life. These questions transition the experience itself to the skill being practiced in “real life,” when they make dietary choices on their own away from you. They explore the nature of the skill, reflect on how the skill has been developed through their work and sets the stage for application of the skill in new situations.

Step 5. APPLY...What’s next? These are the questions we’ve been building toward: you can help youth show that they have gained new knowledge and practiced the skills learned rather than solely focusing on the activity.

Experiential learning:

* Takes place when youth are involved in a project or activity and:
  - they look back at their experience critically,
  - they determine what was useful or important to remember, and
  - then use this information in real life situations (John Dewey)

* Encourages thinking, working harder and ultimately learning more thoroughly than just showing or telling

A supportive adult helps youth discover what they are learning as part of their nutrition education and to dig out deeper learning to help in other dietary choices. You can help this process by:

1. Setting aside enough time for reflecting on the experience.
2. Asking the right questions.
3. Planning developmentally appropriate experiences that lead to reflection.
4. Listening carefully.
5. Supporting each youth’s unique learning.

(Adapted from: Questions for Guiding Experiential Learning, 2005. University of Minnesota.)

Nutrition “EDUTAINMENT”*

1. Sprout various seeds for eating.
2. Sample leafy greens and other vegetables by throwing a salad party.
3. Conduct taste/texture/cost tests using variously preserved types of the same fruit/vegetable (i.e. fresh, frozen, canned).
4. Match color key to the five components of MyPyramid.
5. Keep food journals that highlight how many fruits and vegetables are eaten.

* Edutainment is a regular feature that provides ideas to make nutrition education fun and entertaining reinforcing recent research that states that nutrition education outcomes are enhanced through positive affective reinforcements.

Questions That Prompt...Sharing!

Try these ideas to help you stimulate verbal feedback.

* Tell me what you just did with the apples?
* How did you feel about tasting the apples?
* What do you think when I asked you to smell the apple sample?
* How did your choice of apples before the experiment match with your choice after the experiment?

(Note: You could substitute the name of whatever vegetable or fruit was used in your activity.)

(McFarland, Marcia & Fink, Carol)