



COMMUNITY AT THE TABLE

**Creating Culturally Responsive
Nutrition Education**



NATIONAL
RECREATION AND PARK
ASSOCIATION



A farmers market provides fresh produce at the Kerman Wellness Hub. Photo credit: Kerman Parks, Recreation, and Community Services

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Community members can fresh produce during a nutrition class. Photo credit: Peoria Grown

INTRODUCTION

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe parks and recreation is vital to community health and well-being. Access to these spaces, programs and services remains essential to community vitality and is a key factor in advancing health equity, improving individual and community-level health outcomes, and enhancing quality of life. Park and recreation professionals are uniquely positioned to create — in partnership and in power with community members and key collaborators — the people-centered Community Wellness Hubs needed to advance food and nutrition security in their communities.

Nutrition security means all people have consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe and affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being¹. This requires a multi-layered approach of supporting behavior, environment and policy strategies to effect **systems-level change**. Evidence-based nutrition education is a leading strategy for behavior change and can offer a key entry point to systems change. To advance nutrition security, park and recreation agencies can offer nutrition education that honors community and culture, understands how stress and adversity affect human health and behavior, and recognizes structural inequities that create barriers for people to eat nutritious foods.

¹ US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Food and Nutrition Security. Retrieved from <https://www.usda.gov/nutrition-security>

Culturally Sustaining Nutrition Education

This guidance for nutrition education reflects NRPA’s vision for parks and recreation to serve as Community Wellness Hubs. Community Wellness Hubs should be designed to advance health and wellness across seven interdependent and interconnected dimensions of well-being: economic, emotional, environmental, intellectual, physical, social and cultural.

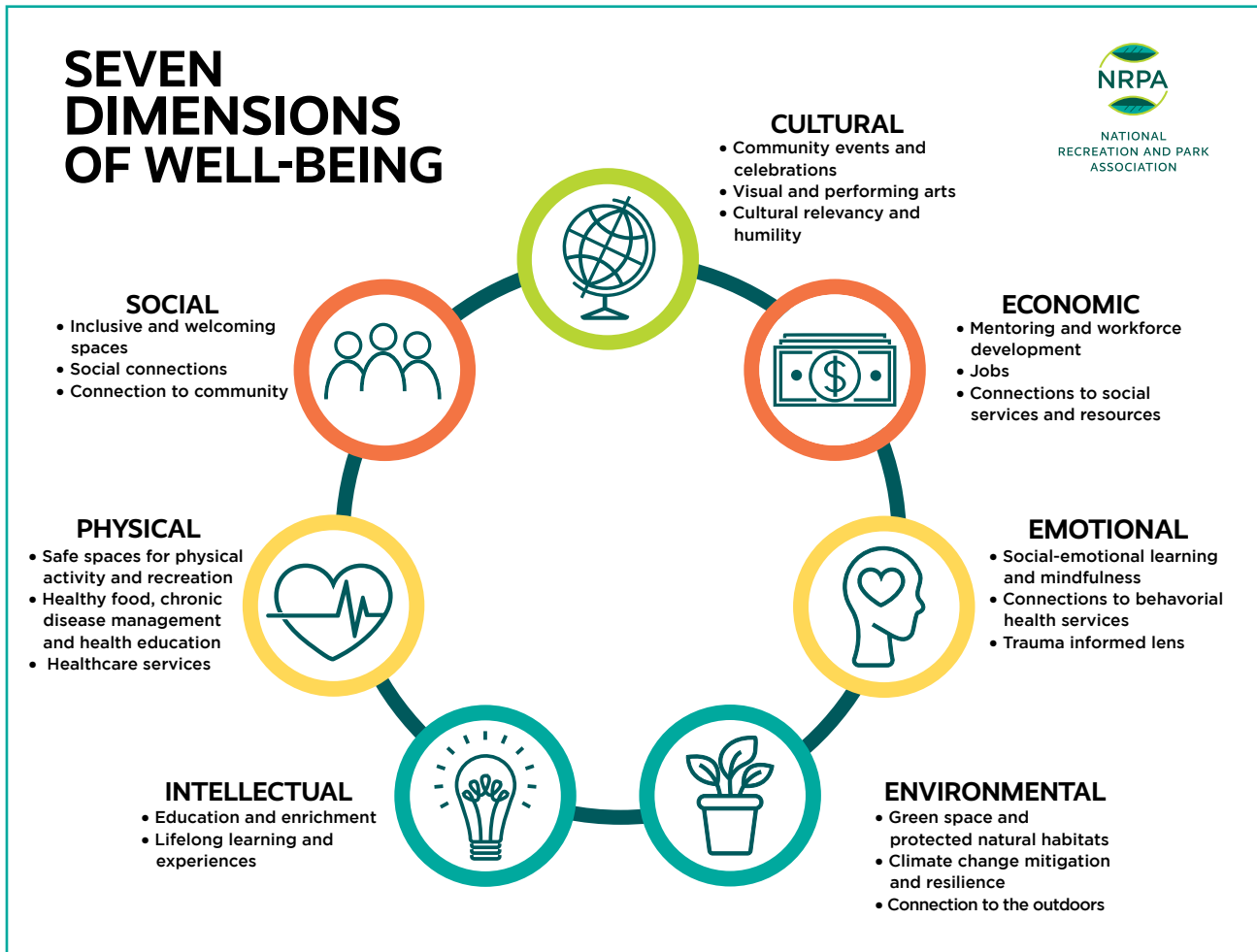


Image of the Seven Dimensions of Well-Being

To advance cultural well-being, agencies provide culturally relevant spaces, programs and services where all can develop a sense of belonging, inclusion and appreciation. They embrace, celebrate and value the identities, traditions and experiences of others. Community members and staff also practice cultural humility, a dynamic lifelong process focusing on self-reflection, personal critique and acknowledging one’s own biases.

It is critical that Community Wellness Hubs are informed and driven by the needs of their communities. Similarly, an agency’s nutrition education program must also be informed and driven by its community members and their cultures. There is not a standard method for culturally relevant nutrition education, because there is not a standard community nor a standard culture. Therefore, this guide offers key considerations for developing a nutrition education program that honors your local community and its cultures. We also recommend using our supplemental guide to trauma-informed nutrition education, which offers additional guidance for considering the needs and experiences of community members and program participants.

Community Wellness Hubs are trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life.



Children make smoothies during a nutrition education class. Photo credit: West Allis- West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services

Terms and Definitions

Language pertaining to cultural relevancy is continually evolving. This guide subscribes to usage of the following terms:

Cultural competence is using knowledge about different groups to inform how you interact with others.

Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but also starts with an examination of their own beliefs and cultural identities. Cultural humility asks us to:

- Be aware of power imbalances and biases and respect others' values
- Recognize that no culture is better than another
- Engage in self-reflection
- Be honest when you're not sure
- Learn about other cultures
- Find a support system

Culturally relevant programming allows participants to maintain cultural integrity while accessing nutrition and community programs. This can also be referred to as **culturally responsive** or **culturally sustaining** programming. This guide uses these terms interchangeably to convey the core meaning of nutrition education that incorporates awareness, understanding, and responsiveness to the beliefs, values, customs and institutions of an agency and applies cultural humility to programming, services, and facilities.

Centering Community and Culture in Nutrition Education

When engaging community members, it is critical to acknowledge past experiences, involve local community leaders and partners, maintain transparency and deliver on promises. This guide offers five practices to support park and recreation professionals with centering community and culture in nutrition education. We recommend following them in order:

- 1 Ask community members what they want in a nutrition education program**
- 2 Allow community perspectives to guide your nutrition education**
- 3 Acknowledge systemic barriers to healthy eating**
- 4 Evaluate improved cultural well-being**
- 5 Continually offer training and resources in cultural humility**

Although this guide is focused on nutrition education, these practices can be applied to any park and recreation program to honor the community and cultures they serve.

1. Ask community members what they want in a nutrition education program.

Step one is to learn from community members about what they want and need from a nutrition education program. Ask community members through online surveys, mailed flyers and in-person conversations after existing programs, during events, by quick response (QR) code on a bulletin board, through community partners or through whatever methods are most effective in your community. Whatever outreach methods are used, it is best to employ a variety of methods to reach a variety of respondents. The outreach methods also should reflect the intended class participants. For instance, if you are organizing classes for children, it is best to engage them in locations where they are already gathered, such as school and out-of-school-time programs.

Invest time and attention toward engaging historically and currently underrepresented community members. If your nutrition programs lack participation from a demographic in your community, critically consider how your agency conducts community engagement and work with trusted community groups to identify more effective methods for engaging and welcoming underrepresented community members. Whomever your audience is, be sure to employ a variety of methods to best inform a program that your primary audience will have the capacity, availability, interest and excitement to attend.



Youth learn about seasonal produce at a local farmers market. Photo credit: West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services



Nutrition education can help community members provide healthier alternatives for family gatherings. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

Engage community members with questions to inform the content and structure of the nutrition education program. The following are some sample questions that can be adapted and refined to reflect the information needed to inform your nutrition education program.

Content-Based Questions

- **What do community members want to learn in your nutrition class?**
- **How do they describe nutrition and nutritious foods?** What foods do they consider nutritious? What foods or practices support their health and well-being?
- **Where have they already learned about food?** Offer options for them to select and elaborate upon, such as family, friends, entertainment, school, after-school programs, etc.
- **How do they want to benefit from their participation?** This question can help inform community-informed outcomes to evaluate in step 4.
- **What foods do they love?** What foods do they eat at home? What foods would they like to learn more about?
- **When choosing foods, what are the factors they consider?** Do they prioritize taste preference, budget, convenience or something else?
- **What dietary restrictions or allergies do participants have?** Consider how dietary restrictions can be incorporated into cooking demonstrations and nutrition classes.
- **What equipment, tools or preparation methods do they use in their kitchen?** Some items can be integral to how they prepare cultural foods and inform what materials participants have access to.
- **What is their greatest barrier to eating nutritious foods?** What is their greatest challenge to cooking nutritious foods?

Structure-Based Questions

- **When are community members available to meet?** Consider the time of day, preferred days of the week, and preferred months of the year. Keep in mind different cultural holidays and competing events or programs that might affect their capacity for attendance.
- **What frequency of nutrition education sessions is feasible for community members to attend?** Consider weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or quarterly frequency. What is the best method for nutrition program delivery (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid)?
- **What length of time best accommodates the intended audience?** Youth may require shorter classes, while adults may prefer longer classes.
- **Where should the class be held?** Consider providing a list of locations (e.g., community centers, libraries, schools, other available locations) and asking them for their preference for where to hold the class.
- **What services and accommodations need to be provided with each session?** Consider language interpretation, transportation assistance, ADA accessibility, childcare, kitchen tool safety, etc. Your intended audience will inform what accommodations need to be considered and inquired about to support their participation.
- **What might limit their ability to participate in the nutrition education class?** Barriers like work schedules, transportation, caregiving, etc., could interfere with participation and can help inform how your nutrition classes are offered.

2. Center and elevate community voices in nutrition education.

Once you've gathered community input, it is essential that you apply it in a timely manner. Telling community members their input is valued while their comments sit unaddressed does not foster community trust. Similarly, developing a community-informed nutrition program without a feedback loop does not allow future community members and program participants to continue informing your program. Valuing community voice requires agencies to demonstrate community prioritization through swift action on community needs and continuous inquiry for program guidance.

The following are recommendations for centering community and culture in your nutrition education:

- Include community members in selecting and updating recipes for nutrition and culinary education.
- Acknowledge healthy components of cultural recipes that align with dietary recommendations.
- Invite participants and community members to share the significance of foods to themselves and to their culture.
- Use recipes that are inclusive of diverse cultural foods based upon community demographics.
- Screen for recipes that are low cost, some that can be quickly prepared, and some for those with limited success in cooking.
- Invite participants and community members to lead a food demonstration with one of their favorite recipes.
- Prioritize or adjust recipes to be dynamic and adaptable rather than fixed and prescriptive.
- Consider conducting a field trip with adult participants to a location where participants prefer shopping for groceries. Allow adults to lead the tour by pointing out nutritious foods they enjoy along with their food preparation tips. For youth, consider a field trip to a farm or community garden that grows culturally sustaining foods.



Farmers markets provide a variety of fresh, seasonal produce. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock



Youth participate in a discussion during a nutrition education class. Photo credit: Central Arkansas Library System - Be Mighty Little Rock

3. Open community conversation on food access and barriers to healthy eating.

During nutrition education, expand your discussions from healthy eating to what barriers exist to finding, purchasing, cooking, and preparing nutritious foods. It is important to acknowledge environmental settings, policies and systems that prevent many people from accessing nutritious foods. These conversations require a trusting space for participants to openly discuss individual and community-level barriers. Consider the following activities to open a conversation on nutrition security:

- Identify **social determinants of health** in your community. Then, discuss the conditions in the community that support and detract from their ability to live their healthiest lives.
- Conduct a community mapping exercise of where program participants get their food.
 - Follow-up: Ask participants to draw an ideal food map of what they wish their community looked like. You can find examples of food mapping exercises [here](#).
- Ask participants what changes in their community would support healthier lifestyles and develop avenues to support them in creating those changes.
- Invite participants to design a plate to apply the principles of healthful eating within the context of familiar foods. Engage participants in identifying where each food component of their plate comes from. [Myplate.gov offers free worksheets](#) to print and use.
- Offer samples of whole fruits or vegetables from various locations, such as a farmers market, grocery store, food bank and convenience store, and ask participants to sample and observe how each item tastes. Ask participants where they get fruits and vegetables in their community, what is needed to add more whole foods to their community and what other things besides fruits and vegetables are needed in their community? [This youth lesson](#) could be adapted to all ages.

Social Determinants of Health are the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.²

Think conversations about nutrition security and food access won't resonate with your participants? Think again! Whether your nutrition education is intended for youth, adults or older adults, all community members can engage in conversations on where their food comes from and what barriers exist to eating nutritious food.

² Healthy People 2030, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Retrieved from <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health>

EXAMPLE FROM JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA:

Dominique Trowell was stunned to learn that his generation was expected to be the first not to outlive their parents. The 17-year-old student wanted to help improve the health of his parents' generation — and his own. He joined peers in a citywide youth group to form a healthy corner store initiative, called "So Fresh, So Clean," to increase the availability of affordable fruits and vegetables in his community. (Source: *Florida Times*)³



Healthy snacks are an important part of everyone's diet. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

EXAMPLE FROM CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT, ILLINOIS:

In 2010, Chicago residents were displeased with the lack of healthy food vending options in Chicago Parks District. With a mission to forge healthy food environments, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) was able to gain funding from a grant to form Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) and partnered with Chicago Park District to set specific standards for what could be sold in the vending machines on park property. A community-based participatory evaluation engaged community and academic partners, who shared in all aspects of the research. The project collected data through observation, surveys and interviews on staff and patron acceptance of snack vending items and purchasing behaviors. Patrons overwhelmingly approved of the more healthful snack vending items; 88 percent of those surveyed reported liking the snack vending items they tried. Almost all (98 percent) patrons purchasing snacks from the vending machines indicated that they would purchase the snacks again. This community-driven policy has influenced other city agencies to adopt similar policies on healthy vending, including the City of Chicago and Chicago Department of Public Health. The policy has now expanded into a Healthy Food Environment Policy that includes guidance on healthy food procurement, growth of farmers markets, federal food programs, nutrition education and healthy menus.

³ Cravey, Beth. (November 14, 2012). "We have to do something: Jacksonville students push for healthy foods at neighborhood stores." The Florida Times-Union. Retrieved from <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/healthcare/2012/11/14/we-have-to-do-something-jacksonville-students-push-healthy/15847829007/>

4. Evaluate improved cultural well-being among other health outcomes.

Improvements in fruit and vegetable consumption and decreased rates of diabetes and obesity are commonly measured participant outcomes in nutrition education. While tracking data for these outcomes is valuable, we encourage park and recreation agencies to brainstorm with community members to determine how they want to define and measure improved health in their community. *Putting Communities First: A Proposed Community Nutrition Education Framework for Institutions*⁴ offers a theory of change for nutrition education that asks evaluators to define measurable success for community programs in partnership with communities rather than being exclusively set by institutions. When involving community members in the development of your nutrition program in Step 1 of this guide, ask how they want to improve their health and well-being to develop holistic community-informed outcomes based on their responses. This information can form the core of what you aim to evaluate.

In addition to community-informed outcomes, park and recreation agencies are encouraged to evaluate program impact on physical health and confidence to make healthy food decisions, while also measuring impact on cultural well-being and additional *interconnected dimensions of well-being*. Below are a few sample questions that can be adapted to your park and recreation agency to evaluate and improve your nutrition and food programs to support the cultural health of your community.



Adults prepare culturally responsive foods in a nutrition education class. Photo courtesy of Desert Recreation District.

Sample Participant Questions to Evaluate Cultural Well-Being Outcomes

On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), please indicate your agreement with the following statements:

1. My culture is represented in [locality's] nutrition and food programs.
2. I feel a sense of belonging in [locality's] nutrition and food programs.
3. [Locality's] nutrition and food programs are inclusive of all cultures.
4. I have opportunities to learn about different cultures in [locality's] nutrition and food programs.
5. I interact with people of different cultures in [locality's] nutrition and food programs.
6. I feel [locality's] nutrition and food programs honor my culture.
7. My voice is represented in [locality's] nutrition and food programs.
8. My input is valued by [locality's] park and recreation department.

Open-ended questions:

1. In what ways do you feel your culture is celebrated by [locality's] nutrition and food programs?
2. In what ways is [locality's] nutrition and food programming relevant to your culture?
 - a. In what ways is the programming not relevant to your culture?
3. In what ways do you feel your [locality's] nutrition and food programs could better honor your culture?

⁴ Alford, S., Bradley, M., Cornwell, L., Ferguson, K., Gepp, A., Lewis, D.B. (2022). *Putting Communities First: A Proposed Community Nutrition Education Framework for Institutions*. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/post/putting-communities-first-a-proposed-community-nutrition-education-framework-for-institutions>

5. Continually offer training and resources for staff, volunteers and community members in cultural competency and cultural humility.

Achieving cultural humility is a lifelong process of learning about other cultures, reflecting on your own relationship to culture and being open and responsive to elements of cultural identity that are most important to another person. Seek trainings and resources for staff and volunteers to embrace cultural humility and support programming that is culturally sustaining. Let this work not happen in a single program vacuum. Rather, find ways to honor community and culture in all aspects of your department's facilities, programs and services. Host events, community talks and workshops on cultural humility for community members to benefit and learn ways to engage with the cultures of their neighbors. Local community-based organizations, universities, hospitals and health departments are great partners to bring additional learning opportunities and resources on cultural humility and competency to your park and recreation center. For additional resources, questions or requests, email NRPA at DEI_Education@nrpa.org.



Youth participating in a nutrition education class. Photo courtesy of New London Recreation Department



Nutrition education results in better health outcomes for community members. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

Trauma-Informed Nutrition Education Guide

Trauma and adversity of any kind can disrupt biology and exacerbate an unhealthy relationship with food. This contributes to poor nutritional health. The relationships between food, individuals, families and communities are complex and are best treated with compassion and a holistic perspective that acknowledges individual, historical and systemic trauma.⁴ Trauma-informed nutrition acknowledges the role Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and other forms of adversity play in a person’s life, recognizes symptoms of trauma and promotes resilience. A trauma-informed approach is characterized by an understanding that unhealthy dietary habits, chronic disease and poor health outcomes may be a result of adverse experiences and not necessarily a result of individuals’ choices. It, therefore, aims to avoid shaming, stigma, blame and further harm upon individuals and communities who have had adverse experiences with food.⁵

TRAUMA-INFORMED NUTRITION

1. Recognizes how stress and adversity affect human health and behavior
2. Avoids shaming, stigma, and blame
3. Promotes resilience

The following are Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) six components of trauma-informed care⁶ with recommendations for how park and recreation professionals can apply them to their nutrition programming.

- 1. Safety and Security:** Environments that consistently support stress de-escalation, healthy choices and wellness practices

Recommendation: Consider your spatial setup, communications, logistics and timing. Consider incorporating mindful breathing and techniques to de-escalate in high-stress situations, such as multitasking while cooking and grocery shopping. Limit noise and sensory overload and maintain an organized, clean and open environment when possible.
- 2. Trustworthiness and Transparency:** Staff who are well-trained to deliver trauma-informed services

Recommendation: Provide/receive training and professional development and develop systems for staff and agency accountability to deliver trauma-informed services. Maintain transparency on food supplies for nutrition and food access programs and communicate updates on upcoming changes or updates to any programs so participants know what to expect.
- 3. Peer Support:** Recognition of themselves and their community as wise and resourceful

Recommendation: Support community members to help each other, teach each other, and share relevant skills and resources. Partner with program participants to lead workshops, share recipes and communicate information about food.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

⁵ California Department of Public Health, California Department of Social Services, & Essentials for Childhood Initiative. (2020, July). Trauma-informed Nutrition Fact Sheet. California PACES Action. Retrieved from <https://www.pacesconnection.com/california-aces-action/blog/new-resource-trauma-informed-nutrition-factsheet>

⁶ SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. (2014).



Local produce is featured at a farmers market in the town center. Photo credit: Town of Vivian

4. Collaboration and Mutuality: Opportunities for shared power and decision making

Recommendation: Allow participants to opt in or out of program sessions or activities by making participation voluntary. Support community members to consider their options, express their preferences, enact choice and self-determination, and adapt according to their preferences, wants or needs. Nutrition education can inform participants about food, but participants have the power to choose what they do with that information.

5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice: Opportunities to practice and grow tangible skills for self-efficacy

Recommendation: Incorporate activities like cooking, decision making, shopping and tangible skills for self-efficacy, planning and food resource management. Allow community members to guide nutrition activities and apply their lived experience and wisdom to programming.

6. Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues: Culturally responsive interactions and experiences that also recognize and address historical trauma

Recommendation: Bring consciousness to personal and systemic biases around different community experiences with food. Offer content and resources that acknowledge the multiple dimensions of nourishment in people's lives. Engage community members in planning recipes for cooking workshops and seek community feedback on food options provided in your programs to feature culturally relevant foods.

These recommendations are adapted from the [Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center](#)⁷, [Outside In](#)⁸ and the [California Department of Public Health and California Department of Social Service](#).⁹

⁷ What is Trauma-Informed Care? (2022, July 7). Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center. <https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>

⁸ Dardinger, N. (2021, July 14). Expanding our understanding of food: Trauma-Informed Nutrition. Outside In. <https://outsidein.org/expanding-our-understanding-of-food-trauma-informed-nutrition/>

⁹ California Department of Public Health, California Department of Social Services, & Essentials for Childhood Initiative. (2020, July). Trauma-informed Nutrition Fact Sheet. California PACES Action. Retrieved from <https://www.pacesconnection.com/g/california-aces-action/blog/new-resource-trauma-informed-nutrition-factsheet>



Fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds are part of a healthy diet. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

CONCLUSION

Centering community and culture in nutrition education does not happen overnight through any singular strategy. It requires a lifelong commitment of continually adjusting your nutrition programs to be guided by the cultures and experiences of community members. As you continue to develop community-informed park and recreation programs, please contact NRPA at health@nrpa.org for resources, support, or opportunities for storytelling.

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