Topic 2: Asking Open-Ended Questions

“The wise man doesn’t give the right answers, he poses the right questions.”  - Claude Levi-Strauss
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Questions are a normal part of the conversations people have every day. Frequently, the type of questions asked will determine the nature of the information received in return. This section will explore how to use open-ended questions to build better conversations that are more effective in helping WIC families adopt healthy behaviors. Below are key messages to help staff understand the benefits of open-ended questions, including when and how to use them successfully.

**What is an open-ended question?**

Open-ended questions require more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or short answer, such as a specific fact or number, and allow more room for the participants to share information that is important to them. Designed to elicit a longer response, open-ended questions encourage conversation by inviting participants to tell a story. By exploring participants’ individual needs and interests, we are better able to tailor advice and information sharing. The use of open-ended questions signals to participants that we are interested in learning more about them, which builds rapport and trust. In addition, open-ended questions allow participants to explore their personal reasons for making positive changes in their lives and how to go about making those changes. Because they encourage the participant to talk about the things that hold importance in their lives, open-ended questions can be an efficient way to collect useful information in the limited time available for a WIC appointment.

**Characteristics of open-ended questions**

- Require more than a yes or no or short answer
- Often begin with a “what”, “how”, or “tell me”
- Do not require a “right” answer
- Come from a place of curiosity
- Are often short with simple phrasing

**Why ask open-ended questions?**

Open-ended questions serve many purposes and can be used throughout the WIC appointment. Some common uses for open-ended questions during the appointment include:

- Starting the session in a relaxed conversational style to build rapport with participants
- Showing interest and caring for the participant’s situation
- Creating a sense of equality between participant and counselor
- Allowing the counselor to collect more information
- Exploring what the participant already knows or needs to know about a topic
- Helping the participant to think and talk about change
- Asking the participant about health related goals
- Allowing the counselor to tailor the guidance to an participant’s individual circumstances
- Finding out what the participant thinks about the information shared
Silence is golden
Participants may take a little longer to answer open-ended questions. It may take several moments for them to formulate their answer before they respond. This is normal, and silence after a question most likely signals that participants are thinking about their response. Although it is often difficult, restrain from filling in the silence too soon. Being comfortable with silence takes practice, but can help to create a relaxed, non-rushed atmosphere. If the participant is taking too long, check for understanding, offer to rephrase the question, or provide an example, if appropriate.

Follow-up with listening
After asking a question, remember to actively listen to the participant’s response. Because of time constraints, we often feel rushed and are already thinking of our next question while the participant is answering. Giving the participant our full attention is a sign of respect and may help the participant share more open and honest information. Listening carefully to the participant’s response will often guide your next response or question.

Probing for more information
When asked a question, participants will frequently give a short or partial response initially. Following up a question with reflective listening will often help participants share more, elaborating on their answer. Sometimes, participants may use short phrases like “she eats fine” or “he is doing well.” Additional open-ended questions help to probe for more information or to clarify information. Participants often take these additional questions as a sign of interest and caring and may open up and continue to explore the topic in greater detail.

Ask why… get a lie
Although it is not intended, beginning a question with the word “why” will sometimes be taken by the participant to imply judgment. This may lead participants to give an answer they think the staff wants to hear or the ‘right’ answer. Instead, try asking questions that begin with “how” or “what.” These questions tend to be safer for the participant to answer.

Instead of: “Why are you choosing not to breastfeed your baby?”
Try: “What are some of the reasons you are choosing to formula feed your baby?”

Instead of: “Why don’t you offer your children vegetables?”
Try: “If you did offer vegetables, which ones do you think they would like?”

A place for closed-ended questions
Any WIC appointment will call for a mix of open and closed-ended questions. Closed ended questions are an efficient way to collect specific information needed during the WIC appointment. Often, open-ended questions can be used to collect the bulk of the information needed and closed questions can be used to confirm details, clarify responses and to collect any missing information.
Common mistakes when asking open-ended questions

Below are a few common mistakes made when learning to use open-ended questions:

1. **Following an open-ended question with a closed-ended question**
   Staff may add a closed-ended question onto an open-ended question. Participants will answer only the last question asked, the closed question. As a result, the value of the open-ended question is lost.

   Examples include:
   - “How has his appetite been? Good?”
   - “How has the pregnancy been going for you? Any nausea this time?”
   - “How are you doing with the prenatal vitamins? Are you taking them regularly?”

   Ask the open-ended question and then stop and allow time for the participant to answer. If the participant needs additional clarification after an open-ended question, it is then appropriate to offer more targeted questions.

2. **Asking knowledge-based questions**
   Open-ended questions are used to collect information about the participant’s thoughts, beliefs and feelings. If a question has a defined ‘correct’ answer, it is best to simply share this information with the participant. Additionally, asking the participant, “what do you know about…” often leads people to give what they think to be the ‘right’ answer. Asking, “what have you heard about…” is often a safer question and allows participants to provide answers they may be unsure about and want more information about. It also allows the counselor a safe way to correct any misinformation.

   Instead of:  
   “What do you know about when to introduce solid foods?”
   Try:  
   “What have you heard about when to introduce solid foods?”

3. **Giving advice hidden in a question**
   Giving advice that is phrased as a question can build resistance in participants. When giving advice, try to give it simply and directly. Examples of hidden advice include:
   - “Would you be willing to stop adding cereal to the bottle?”
   - “Could you switch to skim milk?”

4. **Asking a string of questions**
   During the nutrition assessment process, staff often have to ask several questions in a row to collect the necessary information. This may lead to a feeling of being interrogated and defensiveness on the part of the participant, which may limit them from sharing truthfully. Preparing the participant beforehand can make the participant feel more comfortable. Example: “To get a complete picture, I’d like to ask you several questions about Jose’s health and his eating. Would that be alright?”
Activity 1: Forming open-ended questions

Introduction:

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about identifying and forming open-ended questions.
- Ask staff to share what they have learned about open-ended questions and why they are important. Share content as appropriate from the Key Messages section.
- Ask: when are some times during the appointment when you like to ask open-ended questions?
- Ask: what are some open-ended questions that work well for you?

Activity – part 1: Identifying open-ended questions

After reading each question below, ask staff to identify which are open and which are closed questions. Some of these questions are tricky and may lead to a discussion among staff. Encourage the conversation and remind staff that sometimes an open-ended question may still lead to a short answer and sometimes a closed-ended question could lead to a longer answer, but in general, open-ended questions tend to encourage more conversation.

- Do you work? (closed)
- How is she doing? (Tricky...begins with a “how” which makes it open, but this question may lead to a short answer like “fine” so it acts more like a closed ended question)
- What did the doctor tell you during his last check up? (open)
- Is there something you wanted to talk about today? (closed)
- Tell me about dinnertime with your family. (open – tricky...although not technically a question, statements with “tell me about..” act like questions and invite participants to tell a story.
- Have you started feeding your baby solid foods yet? (closed)
- Do you need a referral today? (closed)
- What things have you already tried? (open)
- What has your family said about breastfeeding? (open)
- Does she eat snacks like cookies or candy? (closed)
- What do you think would work for your family? (open)

Activity – part 2: Forming open-ended questions

Read each statement below and ask for volunteers to take the question and ask it slightly differently to make it an open-ended question. Tell staff that there are several different open-ended alternatives for each closed-ended question. As an alternative, you could have staff work in groups of 2-4 and come up with one or two open-ended question alternatives for each closed question. After completing the exercise, have groups share their responses for each question.
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For each closed-ended question below, write one or two alternative open-ended questions.

- Do you plan to breastfeed?
  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Is your child a picky eater?
  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Do you have any income?
  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Are you going to try some of the ideas we discussed today?
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Is Wednesday, April 5th at 10am a good time for your next appointment?
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Do you have any concerns about your child’s eating habits?
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Does your family like to try new foods?
  ____________________________________________________________________________
Activity 2: Probing for more information

Introduction:

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about forming questions to probe for more information.
- Ask: when are times when you may need to probe for more information from the participant?
  - Examples might include:
    - when someone gives you a short answer
    - when there is emotion
    - when you don’t think you have the whole story
    - when there is a potential nutritional risk
- Explain that people often don’t share all the information up front. Often follow-up questions are necessary to get the complete picture.

Activity: What do you want to know?

- Ask staff to get into pairs (or groups of three if there is an uneven number).
- Hand out the following sheet that contains statements from participants.
- For each statement, ask staff to come up with one or two open-ended questions that would get additional information from the participant.
- Tell staff that they will be asked to share some of their responses with the group when they are done and that there are many possible probing questions for each statement.
- Some staff may want to start giving advice right away instead of probing for more information. Assure staff that this is a natural response. Share that if we hold off on giving advice, and instead ask more questions to get a more complete picture of the issue, that any information we do share will be better targeted to the needs of the participant.
- After staff has had a chance to create the questions, read each statement and have staff share some of their ideas.
- Some staff may share closed-ended questions. Ask staff to think of ways to phrase the question openly to collect more information.
- After staff have shared ideas, discuss the activity:
  - What are some of the reasons why we needed to probe for more information?
  - What are some examples of general probing questions that work well in many situations?
  - How will this activity help you to probe for more information with your participants?
For each participant statement below, create two probing questions that would give you more information about the issue:

- He is with my mother-in-law all day so I don’t have much say over how he eats.

  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- I am not going to breastfeeding. I didn’t make enough milk with my older daughter.

  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- Kayla is just so picky and I am worried that she is going to get sick because she is too skinny.

  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- I don’t have any proof of income. I don’t have a job.

  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- I don’t want to gain too much weight with this pregnancy and get diabetes like my aunt.

  ____________________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________________
Activity 3: Do I want to see this movie?

This is a fun activity to do with staff to demonstrate the value of open-ended questions.

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about identifying and forming open-ended questions.
- Ask staff to share what they have learned about open-ended questions and why they are important. Share content as appropriate from the *Key Messages* section.
- Ask staff to work in pairs.
- Ask staff to think silently about their favorite movie.
- Tell staff that by asking a series of five questions, they will need to decide whether they will want to see the movie their partner is thinking about.
- Start by having the partners ask 5 questions of each other that can only be answered by YES or NO (closed-ended questions). Have one partner ask all 5 questions and then have the other partner ask their 5 questions.
  - Examples of questions might include: (only provide examples if needed)
    - Was it an action film? Romance? Sci-fi?
    - Was it based on a book?
    - Does it have a happy ending?
- Then tell each partner that they can now ask 5 open-ended questions of each other to determine if they would like to see the movie.
  - Examples of questions might include: (only provide examples if needed)
    - What was your favorite part of the movie?
    - What are some reasons this is your favorite movie?
    - Tell me about the story line of the movie?
- Ask staff some questions about the activity:
  - Would you like to see the movie?
  - Which type of question gave you more information?
  - What are some open-ended questions that worked well?
  - How can we use this lesson in our work at WIC?
- Summarize the discussion.
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Ideas for a facilitated conversation with staff

The Importance of open-ended questions

- Let staff know that this discussion will be about forming helpful questions.
- Ask: Why do we ask questions in conversations?
  - Possible answers: to get information; to show interest; to keep the conversation going.
- Ask: What does ‘open-ended’ question mean to you?
- Ask: What are some of the benefits of open-ended questions?
- Ask: What are some challenges to asking open-ended questions?
  - Write down the challenges mentioned. (Responses may include: participants may talk too much and there isn’t enough time; participants may ask a question and I might not know the answer; participants may feel interrogated; participants will still give a short answer, etc.)
  - Spend some time trying to brainstorm solutions or changes you could make to address those issues. Examples:
    - Ask: How can you make use of open-ended questions given the limited time you have for a WIC appointment.
    - Ask: When a participant is talking too much after an open-ended question, what are some gentle ways to move on in the conversation.
    - Ask: What are some ways to help participants talk more?
- Ask: What are some open-ended questions that you have found that work well?
- Ask: What are some that didn’t work well?
- Ask staff to look at the handout *Examples of Open-Ended Questions.*
  - Have staff take a couple of minutes to read through the questions and circle 5 that they think may be effective with participants.
  - Optional - ask staff to share ideas with a partner.
- Ask: Which of these would you be most likely to use with participants?
  - Follow-up with: What are some of the reasons you like that one?
- Summarize the discussion.
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Sample Script

- The following sample of a WIC appointment is adapted from the Oregon WIC Listens resources.
- Ask staff to play the parts of the CPA or certifier, and the mom. Give them the script ahead of time to read through to prepare.
- Explain to the staff that we will be role-playing the middle of a WIC appointment to demonstrate effective uses of open-ended questions.
- Ask staff to jot down any open-ended questions they hear the CPA using.
- After the role play, have staff share their feedback about the interaction:
  - What were some things the CPA did well in this scenario?
  - What were some of the open-ended questions the CPA used?
  - How did they help collect valuable information?
  - In what ways did they help the CPA tailor the information provided?
  - What other C.A.R.E.S. skills did you hear being used?
  - Would you have done anything differently? What other open-ended questions may have worked in this scenario?

Child Recertification – Sample Script

Scenario: Mom is here to recertify her son Jose who is 2 and is very overweight. Check-in, income and residency eligibility, weighing and measuring have been completed. The participant and certifier are beginning the nutrition assessment and education.

CPA: (looking at the computer) Hmm, I see Jose is going to turn 3 years old next month – what are you finding fun or interesting about him right now? (open ended question)
Mom: (thinking for a minute) Well, he is a really good eater. He’ll eat just about anything I put in front of him.
CPA: So you like that he’s not a picky eater and he has a good appetite. (reflect)
Mom: Yes. You know, he’s my miracle baby.
CPA: (leaning forward) Tell me more about that. (open ended question)
Mom: He was a preemie and small for his age – only 4 lbs at birth. And the doctors were very worried about his weight and his growth for a long time. They used to give me a hard time about him not gaining weight, so I worked really hard to give him special foods and get him to eat. Now he’s eating really well and I think he looks great.
CPA: You’ve really put a lot of love and effort into caring for Jose. (affirm)
Mom: Yes, and I don’t need other people telling me what I should feed him.
CPA: You know best what Jose likes and doesn’t like. (reflect)
Mom: That’s right.
CPA: So what kinds of things do you and Jose like to do together? (open ended question)
Mom: Well, he really likes to run around in the park and ride his tricycle. It’s hard now with the rainy weather we’ve been having.

CPA: That’s great that you encourage him to be physically active. (affirm) What are ways you’ve thought of to keep him active in spite of the rain? (open ended question)

Mom: Well, there’s an elementary school down the block from my apartment that has a covered play area. Sometimes we go down there with his tricycle and he rides around.

CPA: That sounds like fun! (affirm) What other concerns do you have about Jose’s health or nutrition? (open ended question)

Mom: Well, I’ve noticed some white spots on his front teeth. Jose really loves his bottle, but do you think that’s a problem for his teeth?

CPA: What have you heard about baby bottles and tooth decay? (open ended question) (check for understanding)

Mom: Well, his dad says it’s from him still drinking a bottle during the night. I guess it could be hurting his teeth. But I’ve tried some things to get him off the bottle and none of them work.

CPA: Tell me about what you have tried. (Open ended, clarifying)

Mom: I tried bribing him with a new Teddy Bear, but he still wanted the bottle. I also tried just putting a little bit of milk in the bottle, but he would cry for more. Since I wanted him to gain weight, I’d go ahead and give him a little more.

CPA: Many moms find it’s hard to get kids off the bottle (reflection with norming) Would it be OK with you if we went over some ideas in this pamphlet that have worked for other moms? (ask permission)

Mom: Yeah, that would be OK.

CPA: Here are some ideas to consider. (circling items on the pamphlet). What do you think you might be able to try? (open ended question) (client’s right to choose)

Mom: Hmm...(looking at the pamphlet) I think I could put water in that night bottle.

CPA: That would be an excellent step. (affirm) How do you think Jose will react? (open ended question)

Mom: I don’t think he’ll like it but maybe then he would stop wanting it.

CPA: You think this change might encourage him stop on his own. (reflect)

Mom: I hope so! It’s worth a try.

CPA: It feels like a good place to begin. (reflect). I’m going to make a note of this in Jose’s record so I can check back with you at his next appointment to see how it went. Would you like to take this pamphlet with you? (ask permission)

Mom: Yes, I’ll show it to his dad and see what he thinks.

CPA: Good. It would be great to be able to work on this together! I know you’ll do great. (affirm) So, today we have visited about Jose’s appetite and activities and nighttime bottle. (summary) What other questions or concerns do you have about Jose’s health or nutrition? (open ended question)

Mom: Nothing else today.

CPA: OK. In order to continue helping you with with Jose’s diet, Jose can be requalified on WIC for another 6 months. We’ll need to see you and Jose in three months for an appointment to check on how he is doing with that nighttime bottle and while he is here we can also check his growth and weight gain. How does that sound? (ask permission)

Mom: That should work.

CPA: You take care. Thanks for coming in today! (build rapport) See you in a few months.

Stop here and ask the discussion questions above.
Observation Guide: Asking open-ended questions

**Option 1:** Observe staff. Note areas where staff did well asking open-ended questions and areas where open-ended questions may have been helpful.

**Option 2:** Have staff observe each other and use this form to note areas where they do well. Have them share specific feedback with each other about strengths they saw. Encourage sharing strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Comments and examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking open-ended questions to encourage conversation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probing for more information</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Allowing silence after questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding out what the participant already knows or would like to know before sharing information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking the participant for their ideas and solutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking questions to follow up after sharing information</td>
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</table>
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**Self Observation Guide: Open-ended questions**

- Each time you use open-ended questions successfully to encourage conversation with participants, note the questions you used. Collecting successful open-ended questions will help you use them in the future with other participants.

- Save this sheet to remind you of successful open-ended questions and share them with your co-workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful question – give yourself a star!</th>
<th>Write down successful open-ended questions or conversation starters that led to a positive interaction with the participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>★</td>
<td><em>I asked “if you could change one thing about the way your family eats, what would it be?”  Mom said she didn’t want to be a short order cook and serve different things for everyone and it led to a great discussion about things she could try.</em></td>
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</tbody>
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**Ideas from my co-workers:**
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Open-Ended Questions – When to Use Them

To open the conversation
- What are the areas you want to make sure we cover today?
- What has life been like since the baby came home from the hospital?
- Tell me about how this pregnancy has been for you so far?

To gather more information
- Tell me about the foods he typically eats?
- Could you give me an example?
- What about her diet do you wish was different?

To find out what the participant knows or wants to know about a topic
- What are some things you have heard about establishing your breastmilk supply?
- What concerns you the most about his picky eating?
- What types of things have you tried already?

To encourage conversation when no issues surface during the assessment
- What healthy habits do you want for your kids when they grow up?
- What are some of the things you do to keep you and your family healthy?
- What is one thing, related to your health, that you wish were different?

To help the participant talk about the process of change
- What are things you like and don’t like about smoking?
- What got your thinking about making the change?
- What are some of the best reasons, from your point of view, for doing this?

To draw out solutions from the participant
- What has worked in the past? What worked with your other children?
- What are some things you could try?
- If you did decide to cook more vegetables, what types of vegetables would you try?

To follow-up after providing information
- What are your thoughts about this information?
- Which of these suggestions would be most useful in your life?
- How do you see yourself using this information?

To help the participant make a plan
- What are the first steps you would need to take to make that happen?
- If you did decide to make that change, what do you think would work for you?
- What could you do the next time she cries for the bottle?

To help build confidence
- What will you do when something comes up and you aren’t able to stick to your plan?
- How will you feel when you are finally done with bottles?
- How confident are you that you can make this change?
Goal
To encourage the client to think and talk about change.

Key Elements
1. Ask the client specific open-ended questions to draw out “change talk.” Ask about:
   - Concerns about a perceived problem
   - Reasons for change
   - Intentions for change
   - Ambivalence about change (pros/cons)
   - Confidence in ability to change
   - Ideas and options for change
   - Roadblocks in making a change

2. Ask questions in a way that is opening and inviting.

Avoid
Asking closed-ended questions, which elicit a “yes” or “no” response or a short answer.

Sample Questions
What are you enjoying most about your child’s age right now?
How do you feel about your child’s eating habits?
What concerns do you have about breastfeeding?
How confident are you that if you decided to work at this, that you would be able to find ways to offer more fruits and vegetables?
What would need to be different for you to consider breastfeeding?
What are some things you like (dislike) about _________?
What would be some of the good things about making a change?
Let’s suppose you decided to prepare more fruits and vegetables at home. What would need to be different in your life? What has to change?
What could you do? What are your options?
What might get in the way?

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Examples of open-ended questions

Open-ended question starters:

- Tell me about …
- What concerns you the most about …
- What do you think about …
- What have you heard about …
- What experience have you had with …
- What are your questions about …
- Could you give me an example …
- In what ways …

Some examples of open-ended questions: (circle your favorites)

- If you could change one thing about the way your family eats, what would it be?
- What foods do you wish your family ate more of?
- How is this pregnancy different from your others?
- How do you feel about breastfeeding?
- What have you heard about weight gain during pregnancy?
- Tell me about support you will have at home when the baby is born.
- Tell me about the delivery.
- What has life been like since the new baby arrived?
- What are some of the best things about being a new mom?
- What worries you most about returning to work?
- When it comes to feeding your baby, what would be most helpful to know about?
- What are the things you like most about breastfeeding?
- How would your life be different if she were done with the bottle?
- What do you think about your child’s weight?
- Tell me about a typical day of eating for Jose.
- What are the tough things about trying to change the way your family eats?
- Tell me about dinnertime with the family.
- How do you feel about the amount of TV, videos and games your child watches?
- Tell me about her bedtime routine.
- What are some of the reasons quitting smoking is important to you?
- What is there about your smoking that others might see as reasons for concern?
- What makes it tough to fit exercise (or activity) in your current daily routine?
- What do you see as your next steps?
- What can you do this week to start the process?
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References / Resources

**Books**


**Websites**

- Oregon WIC Listens
  www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/wic/docs/orwl/
- Touching Hearts, Touching Minds Website, Pam McCarthy and Associates
  www.touchingheartstouchingminds.com
- California WIC Program
  http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WIC-LocalAgencyResources.aspx
- WIC Works Resource System
  http://wicworks.nal.usda.gov