

Topic 9: Engaging Children



*One generation plants the trees;
another gets the shade.*
- Ancient Chinese Proverb



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Key Messages for Champions

The majority of our WIC participants are children. Providing a supportive environment for parents and caregivers in which children are welcomed and engaged in the WIC experience, will create a fun, relaxing environment and help caregivers be receptive to C.A.R.E.S. discussions about adopting healthy behaviors. Young children are curious about the world around them and love to learn new things. The WIC session can be a great opportunity to help preschoolers learn about food, nutrition and activity. This section will explore the importance of engaging children in the WIC experience and offer tips for creating a child-friendly WIC session.

Building rapport with parents

Building rapport with caregivers involves creating an open-atmosphere of trust and partnership and starts when they first arrive at the clinic. One easy way to build this bond with caregivers is to show interest in their children. Parents are proud of their children and the central role they play in their lives. By showing interest in their children, WIC staff help parents trust and share their hopes and dreams for their child, opening the door to discussions about adopting healthy behaviors. Some simple ways to acknowledge children include:

- Introduce yourself to children. This makes the children feel welcome and makes both the children and caregivers feel respected.
- Ask questions that show you have an interest in the children and their parents.
- Compliment the children. This will help develop a bond with parents and caregivers.

Engaging children

Young children are fun and full of energy. They are discovering the world around them and often ask lots of questions to help learn. Whenever possible, directly engage the children by asking them questions about food or physical activity. Simply talking about eating healthy foods, and affirming children and caregivers for their choices, reinforces the behavior and helps build importance for caregivers to offer more healthy foods. Involving children in the WIC session may provide caregivers with insights about their child's eating preferences and concerns. Some examples of questions may include:

- "What is your favorite food?"
- "What is your favorite fruit?"
- "What foods do you not like to eat?"
- "What games do you like to play?"
- "How do you help your parents at home or in the kitchen?"

An essential part of helping children learn about nutrition is to make it fun! WIC Staff have a role in making the WIC experience more enjoyable and less scary for children. A few fun ideas for staff to make the WIC experience more fun for children (and themselves) include:

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- Have a costume day. Have WIC staff dress as fun characters.
- Have a crazy hat day. Have WIC staff wear a silly hat during work.
- Have a pajama day. Have WIC staff wear their pajamas to work.

Engaging children in groups

Involving children in education groups helps them develop physical, social and cognitive skills. It can also be a great way to role model ways that parents can engage their children in constructive learning and physical activities. For discussion groups, ask children what they think about the topic. Parents may be surprised with the responses of their children. When possible, include children in the group activities or make them the focus of the activity.

Each preschooler's physical, social and cognitive skills will progress at different rates. Crafting activities for a wide range of skills makes it safe for all children to participate. Simple activities with movement are more appropriate for the preschool age rather than activities using fine motor skills (like cutting or writing) which are more appropriate for the older child. Story books are also a popular way to reinforce topics with children. Some children may be shy and not want to join the activities. It is best not to force children to join the activities. They may join in when they see others enjoying it.

Often, having too much noise and too many people can sometimes frighten children. Speak in calm, welcoming tones and try to reduce distractions and outside noise. Children have short attention spans so shorter activities are often best. Setting rules helps children stay on task. Young children do well with specific guidance during group activities.

Creating a child-centered environment

The WIC program focuses on children and families and the clinic environment should reflect that, making families feel welcome and comfortable. Toys in the offices engage the children and allow parents the freedom to talk with the WIC staff. Other child friendly touches include books, colorful walls and artwork, and child-sized furniture in the waiting area. Some ideas for creating a child-friendly environment include:

- Have toys for children available in waiting rooms and offices.
- Personalize your office so it says something about you. This will help build rapport and trust with participants if they feel more connected to you as a person.
- Hang child friendly pictures. Pictures can represent WIC's goals such as healthy eating, healthy happy families, physical activity and breastfeeding.
- Colorful paint colors can impact the experience and make the WIC clinic less intimidating.
- Set aside a section of the group room for children with a rug, toys, puzzles, or pictures for the children to color.

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Role-modeling discussions

Role-modeling is an important topic that can involve the caretaker as well as the child. Parents and caregivers are their children's first teachers and have the largest influence on their child's future eating habits. Talking with caregivers about how children learn can help them realize the power they have and reinforce the importance of role modeling. Children watch their parents and caregivers for how to act, what to eat, and what is appropriate behavior. Asking parents what positive habits they hope their children will learn from them may help parents think about the central roles they have in forming their child's healthy habits.

If parents eat fruits and vegetables, their children are more likely to model their behavior. Children will also model parent's level of physical activity. Parents who participate in the child's play, games, and activities contribute to the child's overall development. Research shows that health habits develop very early in life and, once well established, are exceedingly difficult to change. Meals are a great time to role model healthy eating behaviors, proper table behavior, and other social skills.

Engaging grandparents

Many grandparents are involved in raising children. Some are the primary caregivers and others interact with the children on a more limited basis. It is important to reinforce the important role grandparents have in shaping the eating habits of young children. Helping grandparents feel this responsibility will help them set a good example for their grandchildren. Topics for discussions with grandparents could include:

- Being a role model by eating healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables in front of the grandchildren.
- Providing fruits and vegetables as healthy snacks.
- Encouraging active play.
- Going for walks together.
- Drinking water instead of sugary drinks.
- Limiting television to one hour a day or keeping it off while the grandchildren are visiting.
- Saving sweets such as cookies, cakes, and candy for special occasions.
- Rewarding children by doing things with them such as playing games together or telling stories.

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Activity 1: Explaining nutrition concepts to children

Introduction:

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about how to describe nutrition concepts to children using language they understand.
- Ask staff for some of the reasons it is important to engage children in the WIC sessions.
 - Ideas might include: it will keep them engaged; it helps build rapport with the parents; it helps children learn about healthy foods and activity; hearing the children talk about positive behaviors helps reinforce caregiver's importance for serving healthy foods.
- Ask staff for some ideas for engaging children in the WIC appointment.
 - Ideas might include: asking them questions about their favorite foods, showing them food models, asking for their ideas.

Activity: Explaining nutrition concepts to children

- Ask staff to work in groups of two to four.
- Hand out the attached sheet and ask staff to read each statement and then brainstorm a way to communicate the same concept to children in a way that they would understand.
- Tell staff to have fun with the exercise and brainstorm creative ways to describe the subject. There are many ways to describe the concept using language a child might understand.
- Review the example on the attached sheet.
- Allow each group 5-10 minutes to brainstorm.
- Bring the group back together to share responses.

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Explaining Nutrition Concepts to Children

Below is a list of four statements. Review each statement and pretend that you had to explain that concept to a child between the ages of 3 to 5. Write down a how you would explain the concept using language a child might understand. Have fun.

Example:

- **Statement:** “Proper dental hygiene helps prevent tooth decay, bacteria growth and dental caries.”
 - **One possible way to explain the concept to children:** “Cleaning our teeth morning and night helps keep them strong, healthy and bright. Put a dab of toothpaste on the brush and move it back and forth, up and down and all around.”
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1. Statement: Healthy foods provide essential nutrients that are required for children’s growth.

How I would explain this concept to a child:

2. Statement: Physical activity is an essential component of a child’s overall development. They need at least 60 minutes a day of active physical play.

How I would explain this concept to a child:

3. Statement: Appetites in children vary from day to day and from meal to meal.

How I would explain this concept to a child:

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Activity 2: Creating a nutrition education group for children

Introduction:

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about creating fun activities for children to do in a group.
- Ask staff for some of the reasons it is important to engage children in group activities.
 - Possible answers: children that learn healthy habits young will be more likely to have healthy habits as adults; engaging kids in groups helps to keep them occupied; group activities can give parents ideas for healthy activities they can do with their child.
- Print and distribute the handout *Ideas for engaging children in WIC education groups*.
- Review the section on tips for working with young children.
- Review some of the ideas listed for engaging children in WIC education groups.

Activity: Creating nutrition education activities for children,

- Ask staff to split into teams of 3 or 4.
- Ask staff to brainstorm one or two ideas for short activities to do with children ages 3 to 5 to teach them about good nutrition and/or being physically active.
- Allow each group 8-10 minutes to come up with an activity.
- Have each group share their idea with the rest of the group.
- With the larger group, brainstorm a way to combine the activities into an interactive group for children.
- Test this group with participants to see which activities work well. Refine and edit the lesson plan as necessary and add it to the group schedule for caregivers of children ages 3 to 5.

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Activity 3: Creating a family friendly environment

Introduction:

- Explain to staff that this exercise is about creating a family friendly WIC environment.
- Ask staff why it is important to create an environment that is child-friendly.
 - Possible answers: the clients we serve are parents and children; a child-friendly environment will help caregivers feel welcome and comfortable; a friendly environment will make WIC a happy place to come for caregivers and children.
- Ask staff for some ways to create a child-friendly environment.
 - Possible answers: bright colors, rugs, nutrition posters, toys for children.
- Explain to staff that during this activity you will do a walk-through of the clinic and brainstorm ways to make the office child-friendly.

Activity: Creating a family friendly environment

- Have staff walk through the clinic together as a group.
- Ask staff to imagine that they are a new WIC participant arriving at the clinic with their four year old child for the first time.
- Designate a recorder to note observations, comments and suggestions as you tour the WIC clinic.
- Ask staff questions as you move through the clinic:
 - Is the waiting room comfortable and child-friendly?
 - Is there anything that could make the space more child-friendly?
 - Are there toys or activities to occupy children?
 - Are the posters and bulletin boards appropriate for families and easy to read?
 - Are there toys, books or activities in the offices to occupy children in the offices?
 - Is the anthropometric room/area child-friendly?
- After the group has completed the walk through, review any notes and brainstorm short and long-term plans for any improvements that could make the office space more child-friendly.
- Ask for volunteers to help with any projects.
- Bring the plan to the next staff meeting to follow up on progress.

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Ideas for a facilitated conversation with staff: Engaging children

- Let staff know this discussion will be about how to engage children in the WIC experience.
- Ask staff why it is important to engage children in the WIC sessions.
 - Possible answers might include: children can learn healthy habits at a young age; engaging children helps build rapport with parents and caregivers; engaging children helps keep them occupied and interested during the WIC visit.
- Ask staff how engaging children can help build rapport with parents.
 - Possible answers might include: parents find you more likeable when you pay attention to their children; parents may trust you more if they know you enjoy their child; parents may be more receptive to discussions about adopting healthy behaviors if they trust and like you.
- Ask staff to share some ways they interact with children during the WIC visit.
 - Possible answers might include: welcoming children, introducing themselves, complimenting children, asking them questions about foods and activities.
- Ask staff to brainstorm questions that they can ask children about food and activity. Write answers down on a flip chart.
- Ask staff how they keep children occupied when talking with parents in their offices or in groups.
 - Possible answers might include: games, toys, coloring.
- Ask staff their ideas on ways to create groups that focus on children.
 - Possible answers might include: reading a story book, doing FIT WIC activities with the children, playing games.
- Ask staff in what ways this conversation might change the way they interact and engage with children.
- Summarize the conversation.

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Sample Script

- The following excerpt is part of a WIC certification.
- Ask three staff to play the parts of the CPA or certifier, the WIC participant, and the child. Give them the script ahead of time to read through to prepare. Explain that they do not need to read the words in *[orange]*. Those are notes for the facilitator.
- Notes for the staff that will be acting out the parts are in *[blue]*.
- Provide staff with a magic wand toy or a pretend magic wand. (A ruler can be used)
- Explain that in this scenario, the counselor is using a tool called the magic wand which allows parents and children to imagine they have magical powers to change any eating or activity challenge. This tool helps the CPA quickly identify opportunities for behavior change discussions with WIC participants.
- Ask the group to listen for and write down the following during the role play:
 - How does the CPA engage the child in the WIC session?
 - What were opportunities for the CPA to engage the child further in the WIC session?
- Read the scenario and then have the actors act out the sample script.
- After the role play, have staff share their feedback about the interaction:
 - How does the CPA engage the child in the WIC session?
 - What were opportunities for the CPA to engage the child further in the WIC session?
 - What would you have done differently?
- If staff members think that the magic wand technique would be valuable with their clients, they can learn more about using the technique at www.gettingtotheheartofthematter.com.

Child Certification – Sample Script

Scenario: A mom, Maria is here for her WIC certification with her 4 year old son, Felix. The bloodwork and anthropometric assessment have been completed. Felix’s bloodwork values and BMI are within normal limits. The CPA is looking over the nutrition assessment form and is starting the assessment conversation with the participant.

CPA: Thank you for filling out this form. It helps us to get a feel for Felix’s health and eating habits. I am going to review this form and may ask some additional questions just to learn a little bit about Felix’s eating and any goals you have for his eating. How does that sound? *[Asking permission, preparing her for the assessment process]*

Mom: Sounds good.

CPA: *[Turning toward Felix.]* Hello Felix. How are you today?

Felix: Good.

CPA: I like the sweater you have on today. That is a nice color.

Felix: Thanks.

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CPA: Felix, would you like to sit in this chair beside your mom and color this picture of a farmer and his vegetables.

Felix: OK.

CPA: OK good. *[Turning back toward mom]* Let's get started. I see from your form that he has been to the doctor and the dentist recently and there are no concerns and he takes a multivitamin each day.

Mom: Right, a chewable vitamin. He is a very healthy and happy boy.

CPA: You are doing a great job keeping him healthy. *[Affirming]* Our measurements for his height and weight and bloodwork are all normal and show he is growing consistently along a good path.

[Showing growth grid]

CPA: You said he eats a couple of snacks and three meals each day and you have no concerns about his diet. Tell me a little bit more about what types of foods he likes to eat? *[Open-ended question]*

Mom: He likes most things. He likes chicken and even eats fish when I cook it. He likes beans and rice and soup and pasta too. He loves milk and juice. Oh – also apples and bananas, he loves those.

CPA: Wow, you are giving him lots of healthy things to eat. *[Affirming]* Do you have any concerns about his eating?

Mom: No, he eats well.

CPA: *[Turning toward Felix]* Felix, what is your very favorite food to eat?

Felix: I don't know *[Shrugs his shoulders]*

CPA: Felix, can I show you something?

Felix: Yes.

CPA: This is my special pretend magic wand. With it I can pretend to make my favorite food appear. Poof – I pretend to make a big bowl of my mom's chicken noodle soup. Felix, would you like to try my magic wand.

Felix: Yes.

CPA: *[Handing wand to Felix]* Now you have to wave it and say "poof" and tell us what food will appear.

Felix: Poof. Peanut butter and jelly.

CPA: Good. Peanut butter and jelly. That is a yummy sandwich. I will take back my magic wand now and I will help mommy use it. *[Taking the magic wand back from Felix]* So, Maria, now this is my special magic wand just for parents. With it you can change anything about how your family eats or how active they are. If I could use this magic wand to change the way I ate, I would wave it over me and pretend that my craving for chocolate would disappear at 4:00pm this afternoon. *[Handing Mom the magic wand]* What would you change?

Mom: Well, I guess one thing I would change with a magic wand would be that my kids eat their vegetables. Felix will eat potatoes and corn but doesn't like to eat any other vegetables, green ones especially.

CPA: That is a good wish. *[Affirmation]* What do you think you could try to help him to eat more vegetables?

Mom: I don't know. I have tried lots of different kinds but he just pushes them around the plate.

CPA: That sounds frustrating.

Mom: Yes. I've even stopped putting them on his plate because I don't want to waste food and it is easier to give him something I know he will like. He eats everything else well.

CPA: So, even though he is a good eater, you would like him to get a few more vegetables in his diet.

[Reflective listening]

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Mom: Yes, even though he is healthy, I want him to have all the good vitamins that are in the vegetables.

CPA: I hear that same thing from other mothers. Other successful moms like you have shared their practical ideas that work like magic for them. Would you be interested in hearing them? *[Asking permission]*

Mom: Yes.

CPA: Some moms tell me that they like to mix vegetables into their child's favorite food, like putting some spinach in the spaghetti sauce. Other mom's tell me that they have luck when they give their children something to dip their vegetables in like ranch dressing or yogurt. I have also heard from some moms that when they let their child pick the vegetable at the store that they will eat, the children are more likely to eat it later. Would any of these ideas work for you, do you think?

Mom: They all sound good, except the mixing together one. If I mixed a vegetable into his favorite food, he would just pick it out. He has done it before.

CPA: OK. So that idea definitely will not work for you. *[Reflective listening]* What about the others?

Mom: Well, we are going shopping after we leave here, so I could try letting him pick the vegetable by himself. *[Participant expresses an area for potential change]*

CPA: That is a great idea. *[Affirming]* Some moms tell me that if kids can help prepare it in the kitchen, it works even better.

Mom: I would like him to be able to cook when he is older. Not like his Dad. He can't seem to use the stove and would eat pizza every night if it weren't for me.

CPA: *[Laughs]* Great idea. Getting him started helping you in the kitchen now so he doesn't have to eat the same thing every night when he is an adult.

CPA: *[Turning toward Felix]* Felix, when you go to the store today, would you like to pick out a new vegetable to eat and put it in the bag all by yourself?

Felix: Yes.

CPA: Great. And if you can find a green one, that will be extra lucky. *[Turning toward Mom]* So, today we talked about helping Felix eat a few more vegetables. You said you wanted to try letting him pick the vegetable out at the store and maybe starting to teach him some things in the kitchen so he is prepared for when he gets older. Is there anything else you would like to talk about today?

Mom: No. That sounds good.

CPA: So we will be certifying Felix today to continue to help him with healthy eating habits like eating vegetables. Now I am going to put some information into the computer and we will quickly go over the foods in your package and set you up for a next appointment time that works for your schedule. Sound good?

Mom: Yes.

Stop here and ask the discussion questions above.

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Observation Guide: Engaging Children

Option 1: Observe staff. Note areas where staff use skills to engage children in WIC sessions and areas for improvement.

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.

C.A.R.E.S. Skills	Comments and examples
Welcoming children and introducing yourself to children and caregivers	
Using simple and uncomplicated language to explain nutrition concepts	
Affirming children and parents on what they are doing well	
Asking children questions to engage them in nutrition and activity discussions	
Engaging children in activities, games, or books while having conversations with parents or caregivers	

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Self Observation Guide: Engaging Children

- Each time you use techniques to help engage children in the WIC session, note the strategies you used. Collecting successful strategies will help you use them in the future with other participants.
- Save this sheet to remind you of successful strategies and share them with your co-workers.

Successful strategies – give yourself a star!	Write down successful strategies to help engage participants.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>A mom told me that her child attends the head start program. I asked her child what was his favorite food that they served at the head start program. He said the green beans were his favorite. Mom was surprised and reported that she had made green beans a while back but he had not liked them. She said she would try making them again and we discussed the value of asking children their input on which fruits and vegetables to eat and how they may be more likely to try them if they are involved in the decision or the preparation.</i>

Cooking Abilities of Young Children

Helping prepare and cook foods is a great way for children to:

- learn,
- have fun, and
- try nutritious foods.

What activities your child will be able to help with will depend on her or his age. Keep the following in mind when including young children in cooking activities.

Two-year-olds are learning to use the large muscles in their arms. Try activities such as:

- **scrubbing** vegetables and fruits
- **carrying** unbreakable items to the table
- **dipping** foods
- **washing and tearing** lettuce and salad greens
- **breaking** bread into pieces

Three-year-olds are learning to use their hands. Try activities such as:

- **pouring** liquids into batter (you measure first)
- **mixing** batter or other dry and wet ingredients together
- **shaking** a drink in a closed container
- **spreading** butters or spreads
- **kneading** dough
- **washing** vegetables and fruit
- **serving** foods
- **putting** things in the trash after cooking or after a meal

Four and Five-year-olds are learning to control small muscles in their fingers. Try activities such as:

- **juicing** oranges, lemons, and limes
- **peeling** some fruits and vegetables (bananas and even onions)
- **mashing** soft fruits and vegetables
- **scrubbing** vegetables (potatoes, mushrooms)
- **cutting** soft foods with a plastic knife (mushrooms, hard-boiled eggs)
- **pressing** cookie cutters
- **measuring** dry ingredients
- **cracking** open/breaking eggs
- **beating** eggs with an egg beater
- **setting** the table
- **wiping** up after cooking
- **clearing** the table after a meal

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Ideas for engaging children in WIC education groups

- Play a game of food charades in which children act out different eating and cooking actions like, peeling a banana, washing dishes, stirring a pot, or eating pasta.
- Prepare a healthy dish with lots of ingredients and let the caregivers and children try the recipe and take turns guessing all the ingredients.
- Have a healthy egg hunt by hiding plastic Easter eggs with healthy food sayings like, “eat five fruits and vegetables a day”. Have the children find the eggs and bring them to their caregivers (or the CPA) to read aloud.
- Line up a variety of foods and ask children to close their eyes and guess what is in the cup with by using their sense of smell. Pick a variety of foods from different food groups.
- Think of a food, such as a fruit or vegetable and then ask the group to “guess the vegetable” by asking questions about it. If they group is having difficulty, give hints about the food, such as the color or the letter it starts with.
- Cut out pictures of healthy foods from magazines. Spread them out on a table and have children make collages of their favorite healthy foods using glue sticks and construction paper.
- Place different fruits or vegetables in separate paper bags. Pass the bag around the circle and let each child and parent to put their hand in the bag to feel the item. Once everyone has had a turn, let them take turns guessing which fruit or vegetables was in the bag.

Tips for working with young children

- Preschoolers have short attention spans. Make learning activities short and interactive.
- Be enthusiastic. Praise children often. Smile.
- Set simple rules for children. Examples include:
 - Listen to the person talking.
 - Play safely. Ask children not to push, or hit, or climb on the furniture.
 - Take turns and share. Remind children about the importance of sharing and taking turns. Very young children have difficulty taking turns so it is often easier to have all children participating in an activity at the same time.
- When possible, participate in the activities with children.
- Encourage caregivers to join in the activities.

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- If children misbehave, remind them about the rules.

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References / Resources

Training Manuals

- *Fit WIC Families: Activities for Learning about Nutrition and Physical Activity*. Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc. WIC Program.
http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Sharing_Center/statedev_FIT-ITCAZ.html
- *Fit WIC Educators Guide*. Vermont Department of Health, Division of Community Public Health. http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Sharing_Center/FIT-VT/educatorguideVT.pdf

Websites

- Oregon WIC Listens
www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/wic/docs/orwl/
- Touching Hearts, Touching Minds Website, Pam McCarthy and Associates
www.touchingheartstouchingminds.com
- Getting to the Heart of the Matter, The Massachusetts WIC Program
www.gettingtotheheartofthematter.com
- The California WIC Program
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/pages/default.aspx>
- The WIC Works Sharing Center
http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Sharing_Center