

Creative Outcomes of Client-Centered Nutrition Education:

by The University of Texas at Austin
Nutrition Education Group



Every WIC client is important, especially the youngest ones. In previous articles we have discussed small steps we can take to make nutrition education more client centered. This article focuses on WIC kids and how you can make small steps to become more kid-centered in classes. This can be done by creating child-friendly spaces, getting children involved in nutrition education lessons, and offering nutrition education classes and materials that are developed specifically for kids. By taking a client-centered approach to nutrition education for all clients, you can bring new and relevant topics to life for parents and children alike.

Creating a child-friendly space

In WIC, children are clients; so it makes sense to create spaces where they feel welcome and comfortable and where their caregivers can relax and engage in the learning process. Clinics around the state have done many things to construct an inviting atmosphere for children, including child-sized furniture and children's activities. Here are several tips to help craft a child- and parent-friendly learning environment:

- Set aside a corner of the room with child-sized furniture, big cushions or a rug. Keep a supply of coloring sheets, puzzles, or other activities.
- Childproof the room by covering outlets and keeping wires and hazards out of reach. This will provide a safe space for toddlers who get fussy sitting on a lap.
- At the beginning of class, be clear about the expectations for children. For example, let parents know that children are welcome at WIC and that they can use their best judgment if a child becomes upset or noisy. Mention that it is okay to leave the room for a few moments to calm down a child.
- Look at the room and see if a pathway can be created, so parents and children can remain in class and pace. Sometimes, walking crying children will soothe them and eventually quiet them.
- If a child's behavior becomes a minor distraction, try to use it as a teaching point. If talking about child development, point out something that is typical for the child's age group. If the child is old enough, ask the child a question about the topic.

Getting Kids Involved

- If the child's behavior is so distracting that others in the class cannot pay attention, ask whether the parent would like to take the child outside. Communicate sympathy for the parent's problem, rather than anger or irritation. The parent is probably doing his or her best.

Getting children involved in lessons

Beyond creating a child-friendly environment, there are small ways that you can incorporate children into your planned lessons. Whatever the class topic, you can find a way to get children involved with their parents.

- With the new client-centered lesson titled "Introducing vegetables: a conversation about getting children to eat vegetables," consider giving kids coloring pages that highlight fun fruits and various veggies.
- If you are facilitating the "Mooving to low-fat milk" lesson, have the children taste-test as well.
- In a dental health class, grab toothbrushes and teeth models. Get the kids to start playing with the models and brushing them.
- Some clinics are creating gardens to encourage the use of fresh vegetables and herbs. If this is an option for your clinic, let children experience one of nature's best treasure hunts. There is nothing more fun than digging for treasure and finding carrots, potatoes and turnips. One word of caution before heading out on this treasure hunt—make sure you get parents' permission before you go digging in the dirt.
- For a lesson about whole grains, consider printing pictures of different whole grains. Have the parents and children work together to identify the different types of grains while teaching about the "powers" of whole grains.
- If you are teaching a lesson on physical activity, incorporate some small activities for both parents and kids to do in the class. The Zobey DVDs created by Texas WIC are one way to get kids moving in class and at home.
- Consider the creative outcomes a lesson can generate. One clinic found that as the parents started talking about their experiences, great ideas emerged among clients. In one class, the clients decided to exchange contact information and start a playgroup.

Remember, the more a child can identify and positively associate with a nutrition topic (like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat milk) the less resistance a parent may encounter when introducing these items in meals. In fact, the Texas Child Feeding Study found that child preference was the number one motivator for parents when they decided what to feed their children for dinner.

Nutrition Education Tailored for Children

Finally, WIC has an opportunity to develop a child's interest and enthusiasm for proper nutrition and health. Below are a couple kid-centered materials to consider incorporating into your NE offerings, if you haven't already!

- **The Zobey DVDs:** An evaluation of the Zobey DVDs developed by Texas WIC showed that parents whose children watched Zobey reported that their children asked for specific fruits and vegetables that are featured in the videos. For example, three-quarters of children who watched *Zobey's Adventures in Bugland* asked their parents for strawberries; two-thirds of those who watched *Searching for a Rainbow* asked for apples and four out of five children asked for water to drink after viewing the video. Most parents reported that their children danced to the videos when they watched them. Look for more Zobey DVDs coming soon.
- **Get Healthy Now: The Sesame Street Work Shop Get Healthy Now Show DVD** and accompanying lesson promotes movement and active participation to the games suggested in the video. Following the video children are invited to play the "sometimes/anytime food game" where they pick a food and have to decide if it is a "sometimes" food or an "anytime food."

At times it is easy to forget that in WIC, children are clients. It is important to get them involved as much as possible. In fact, getting kids involved in nutrition education helps make it easier for parents to make healthy choices. WIC has a golden opportunity to impact an entire family's decisions about nutrition and health, so let's make sure to get every client involved.

Reference

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/nut/Pdf/TCFSFoodMealtimesReport.pdf>