



WIC Embraces a Client-Centered Approach to Nutrition Education

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WIC nutrition education continually evolves to stay up with the times. In October 2007, Texas WIC implemented Value Enhanced Nutrition Education (VENA), launching a paradigm shift toward participant centered counseling. Since adopting VENA principles, WIC counselors are better able to provide individualized care, support participants in making long-term behavior changes, and promote positive health outcomes. In an effort to apply a participant-centered approach to all nutrition education at WIC, a subtle shift has also begun to take shape in the WIC classroom.

What is Client-Centered Education?

Embracing a client-centered approach to nutrition education means providing more choices and opportunities for active learning, and may involve a variety of learning experiences. From allowing clients to complete their nutrition education online to creating new opportunities in group education, WIC is evolving to meet the needs of our diverse client population. Many agencies are already offering client-centered education, and it's time to make this the norm.

Key elements of client-centered learning include:

- Acknowledging and respecting clients as adults who have expertise about their own families.
- Involving clients as active participants in their own learning.
- Including an element of choice such as choice of lesson topic or format.

Overall, adopting participant-centered principles in the classroom means shifting from a traditional, didactic model to a learner-centered approach, and some staff has begun to call it “VENA of the classroom.” From group discussions to nutrition fairs to action-oriented classes involving games, skits, food demonstrations, or role-plays, client-centered classes can incorporate many different approaches in order to meet learners’ needs. WIC instructors may find themselves shifting from “teacher” to “guide” in order to connect moms and facilitate peer-to-peer learning. One of the biggest benefits of a client-centered approach is the opportunity for WIC participants to share experiences and provide social support to each other in making healthy changes.

Piloting the Concept at Texas WIC

In 2007, eight WIC local agencies participated in a pilot program to experiment with making nutrition education classes more client-centered. During the pilot, 27 WIC staff across the state taught over 95 client-centered classes, reaching over 600 participants. Responses from staff and participants were extremely positive.

WIC staff comment:

“...really enjoyed this format... particularly for our clients who have been on the program for several years. It not only gives them an opportunity to talk about something different, but it also allows them the chance to share their expertise with our newer parents.”

Client comments:

- *“The class was fun.”*
- *“This class gives you the opportunity to express your concerns and ideas.”*
- *“They are more entertaining and I learned new things when exchanging opinions with other people.”*
- *“You actually had class participation instead of watching a video (boring).”*

Enthusiastic feedback from the pilot program spurred development of training on client-centered approaches in order to provide more support to local agencies moving forward.

Training Development

In 2008, as interest in client-centered education grew, state staff began to develop training materials and offer basic training upon request to local agencies. Usually consisting of a full-day hands-on workshop, early trainings focused on adult learning principles, classroom management and facilitation skills, creating and maintaining a positive environment, and incorporating client-centered principles into classes. Several new lessons embracing client-centered principles were also developed, as well as a lesson development template to help local agencies put their own creative ideas onto paper.

Resource Toolkit

As training materials evolved, state staff enlisted the help of The University of Texas Nutrition Education Team to consolidate and reformat the training materials into a resource toolkit for local agencies. Just as client-centered education is not a cookie-cutter method of education for our clients, staff training on the concepts is likely to be most effective if local agency leadership has the capability to tailor it to meet staff needs. When complete, the resource toolkit will hopefully give local agency directors and nutrition education/training coordinators more resources and flexibility to train staff moving forward.

In September 2009, local agencies were invited to send agency leaders to a full-day training workshop in Austin. During this workshop, staff learned about client-centered nutrition education, participated in hands-on activities and discussions, and provided feedback on an early draft of the resource toolkit. Collabora-

tion with and feedback from local agencies has been crucial to this project, and many thanks go out to those who provided input. More details will follow in coming months once the toolkit is ready for release.

Learning from Others

Local agencies who have received state-sponsored training on client-centered nutrition education—either through participation in the pilot program or subsequent trainings—should communicate with their state nutrition education liaison to implement changes slowly, in ways that make sense for them. Interviews with agencies, after client-centered trainings, have shown subtle shifts occurring, such as WIC instructors making an effort to simply listen more and talk less during group classes or arranging seating to create a more client-friendly classroom.

Bigger steps that some local agencies have taken to adopt a spirit of client-centered learning include:

- Incorporating emotion-based materials from Pam McCarthy’s Touching Hearts Touching Minds project into nutrition education classes.
- Building an herb garden on-site at a clinic and exploring it during NE classes to inspire clients about healthy cooking.
- Creating new classes surrounding “hot topics” so participants can discuss timely nutrition topics during classes.
- Adding taste tests and grab bags of props to existing lessons.

While some agencies have used funds from the obesity project mini-grant program to try new things, others have been able to make meaningful changes without additional funding.

On the Horizon

Adopting a client-centered spirit is something we can all do. Be sure to look out for training opportunities as they become available to find out what’s new and to identify next steps for your agency. You can also communicate with your local agency’s nutrition education coordinator and state agency nutrition education liaison to explore ways to move forward. By blending a more client-centered approach into what we’re already doing and sharing best practices we can continue to bring the best nutrition education to the table at WIC.