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DATE: November 17, 2021
TO: Local Agency Staff
FROM: State WIC Staff
SUBJECT: Conversational Assessment: Fifth in the Nutrition Assessment Series

There are many components and requirements to a WIC appointment. Behind the scenes, WIC staff are navigating full schedules, busy families, required questions, risk code assignment, and many other tasks. At times it may feel as if the WIC assessment is a checklist of questions. There are several strategies that can help WIC nutrition counselors slow down and provide an enjoyable, meaningful, and conversational nutrition assessment that will both facilitate gathering information and provide a participant-centered approach. These tips can help you continue to cultivate a welcoming and conversational counseling style.

1. **Engaging** participants begins in the first few seconds of the interaction. Verbally, WIC staff can introduce themselves, set the agenda for the appointment, and ask permission to discuss the participant's health and nutrition. Non-verbal cues, such as body posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice enhance engagement with participants. These behaviors take just a few moments and establish rapport with the participant. With this solid foundation of comfort and trust, the stage is set for an open and productive exchange during the appointment.
2. While WIC staff have many tools available to them to help guide the appointment, one of the greatest tools for promoting a conversational assessment is simply **listening**. People who feel heard are more likely to share openly. Show the participant you are listening with sincere interest and curiosity through your body language, encouragers, and silence. Avoid multitasking on the computer and show the participant the respect of your full attention. Encouragers can be a helpful, simple reflection to show that you hear them without any comment or judgment. Examples include "mm-hm", "I see", and "tell me more" said in a neutral tone. Additionally, permit moments of silence to give the participant space to process and respond without pressure. Strive to be comfortable with silence.
3. While navigating through the required topics of the nutrition assessment, **allow for flexibility**. Start with broad, open-ended questions and allow the conversation to progress naturally. Personalize the discussion to the participant's interests and knowledge. If additional information is needed, circle back to ask more about these areas. For example, after some discussion, the nutrition counselor could say "Thank you for sharing about those feeding challenges. Before we brainstorm some ideas for addressing your concerns, I'd love to hear more about your routine with physical activity to help me get the whole picture." Visual tools, such as circle charts, can provide a guide for the participant so they know which topics are pertinent to that day's discussion. Offer the circle chart with the option of the participant choosing which topic is most interesting to them. The nutrition counselor can refer back to the chart later in the conversation

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to elicit feedback on the remaining items. Some examples of circle charts are listed in the resources below.

4. As you focus on the topic that the participant is most interested in discussing or changing, consider a **guiding approach**. This technique is a collaboration between the participant and the nutrition counselor; it respects the autonomy of the participant while allowing the counselor, with permission, to share their expertise and perspective. For example, “That’s wonderful that you want to be more consistent with outdoor playtime in the afternoon. Let’s make a plan to help you do that. Before we do that, would you mind if I shared a topic that caught my attention as we were talking? I’d like to hear your thoughts.”

Nutrition counseling is an ever-developing skill. As you consider how you might incorporate new techniques into your practice to encourage open conversation, review the questions below and discuss with a colleague.

Discussion Questions

- A participant is on the phone for a remote appointment. They are providing very brief answers to your questions. How would you attempt to make this interaction more open and conversational?
- You are welcoming a long-time WIC participant into your office. Anticipating your questions, she runs through a monologue of information and updates about her family. What are some strategies for engaging this participant?
- Brainstorm your “go-to” encouragers or verbal responses. It might be helpful to ask a colleague to note these at an observation to gain additional perspective – sometimes we aren’t aware of our habitual responses! How might these be perceived by participants?
- Think about an appointment you had where you felt welcome, comfortable, and open. What made you feel that way? What makes you uncomfortable?

Watch for the next memo in our Nutrition Assessment series next month!

Suggested Resources

WIC Nutrition Assessment (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html>)

Prenatal Circle Chart - What to Expect from My Newborn Baby
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/training/bb/chart.pdf>)

My 6-9 Month Old Baby
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/wedupdate/moyr/2017/topic/0927circlechart.pdf>)

Molly Kellogg, RD, LCSW Tip #115 The Engaging Process (<https://mollykellogg.com/tip-115-the-engaging-process/>)

Molly Kellogg, RD, LCSW Tip #166 Silence (<https://mollykellogg.com/166-silence/>)

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Molly Kellogg, RD, LCSW [Tip #144 Wait: Why Am I Talking?](https://mollykellogg.com/tip-144-wait-why-am-i-talking/) (https://mollykellogg.com/tip-144-wait-why-am-i-talking/)

Molly Kellogg, RD, LCSW [Tip #116 The Focusing Process](https://mollykellogg.com/tip-116-the-focusing-process/) (https://mollykellogg.com/tip-116-the-focusing-process/)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 85 E 7th Place, PO BOX 64882, ST PAUL MN 55164-0882; 651-201-4404, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-4404