

## CHAPTER 9

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Action

By the *Fit WIC* Project Teams





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**WIC CAN AND SHOULD PLAY A KEY ROLE** in the national effort to prevent overweight in children. As an established, effective and respected program in the community, WIC is strategically positioned to make a significant impact on this public health epidemic. Its participants, new mothers and young children, are particularly receptive to new ideas and to change. The *Fit WIC* Childhood Overweight Prevention Project has provided innovative program models for implementation in State and local WIC agencies.

During the development and implementation of these models, the Project Teams learned important lessons about what worked and what didn't work in their respective settings. Their qualitative research, done in the initial phases of the Project, added important insights to the lessons they learned from the concrete experiences of their program implementations. On the bases of their common experiences and their qualitative research, the Project Teams compiled the following list of lessons learned and recommendations for actions.

**LESSON LEARNED #1: Many parents of overweight children did not perceive their child as overweight or did not feel that their child's weight was a problem. Parents were not, therefore, motivated to solve an unseen problem of overweight. There was a "disconnect" between the parent's perception and that of the WIC staff.**

*Recommendation:* Change the focus of participant education from *weight* to *healthy lifestyle*. Due to the disconnect between parent and WIC staff on the topic of overweight, discussions that focus specifically on weight are not likely to be productive. When the discussion centers on improving



health behaviors within the entire family, rather than on the child’s weight, nutrition education is likely to be more effective, and the whole family will benefit.

*Recommendation:* In the WIC setting, all children, regardless of current weight status, should be included in nutrition education protocols aimed at overweight prevention.

**LESSON LEARNED #2: Parents were eager to receive in-depth, how-to information on healthy lifestyle choices, even if they weren’t particularly concerned about their child’s weight. They especially wanted activities that involved the entire family, so that all family members could learn and provide support for a healthier lifestyle.**

*Recommendation:* Weave practical, how-to information and skill building activities into every aspect of WIC education. The Project Teams learned that the approaches listed below (or elsewhere in this manual) are well received by both participants and staff. The Project Teams have provided curricula and guidance for each of the following approaches in this manual:

- ◆ Conduct group discussions with parents, facilitated by staff, to help parents identify and share practical solutions to their common problems.
- ◆ Engage parents and children at the WIC site in planned, skill-building activities focusing, for example, on physical activity,<sup>1</sup> cooking, or meal planning.
- ◆ Provide specific suggestions for activities that parents can do at home with their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the text box, “WIC Principles on Physical Activity...” on p. 41 for further guidance on the topic of physical activity in WIC education

**LESSON LEARNED #3: WIC staff were uncomfortable talking about weight issues with participants. They felt that more training and more time with participants was needed to build the rapport essential for addressing this sensitive issue.**

*Recommendation:* Training for WIC staff should include these specific areas and topics:

- ◆ The causes, prevention and treatment of pediatric overweight;
- ◆ Successful methods to open a discussion with parents about overweight;
- ◆ Successful intervention strategies, including dealing with resistant parents, helping families to identify barriers, and motivating participants;
- ◆ The barriers that WIC participants face in their everyday lives to achieving a healthy lifestyle for themselves and their families;
- ◆ Cultural issues related to the topic of childhood overweight;
- ◆ The differences in perception about overweight that exist between WIC staff and participants. Staff tend to perceive parents of overweight children as lacking motivation, and many parents feel blamed by WIC staff. These perceptions must be addressed for effective education to take place!

*Recommendation:* Encourage WIC staff to use a learner-centered approach in their nutrition education sessions. With a learner-centered approach, staff members are more comfortable talking with families and can individualize their approaches. To accomplish this shift in emphasis, WIC staff should:

- ◆ Assess what participants know and what they would like to learn, and involve parents and children in an active process of learning.
- ◆ Focus nutrition education on parental skills to provide

anticipatory feeding guidance and improve the parent-child feeding relationship and child eating behaviors.

- ◆ Educate parents about the importance of parental modeling of healthy behaviors for their children and assist parents in becoming better role models.
- ◆ Ensure that the educational materials available in the WIC clinic are behaviorally focused, easy to read, and meet participants' needs.

**LESSON LEARNED #4: WIC staff members were uncomfortable encouraging participants to lead healthy lifestyles if they were not happy with their own weight or health-related habits. When provided with wellness opportunities and activities, they felt more understanding of overweight participants, and better able to provide them support. Staff felt they could be more effective educators when they could provide *positive* modeling of healthy behaviors.**

*Recommendation:* Provide wellness opportunities at work for WIC staff. This could take many forms, from classes to healthy snacks to group walks and activity breaks. Encourage and support staff to become involved in these efforts.

*Recommendation:* Include all staff, even the “front-line” support staff, in wellness activities to maximize the benefit of these programs.

**LESSON LEARNED #5: Promoting physical activity as part of nutrition education in the WIC setting was well received by WIC parents, children and staff.**

*Recommendation:* Incorporate the promotion of physical activity (e.g. the “Aim for Fitness” message found in the “Dietary Guidelines for Americans”) as an essential element of the WIC approach to nutrition education.

- ◆ The concept of balancing physical activity with energy intake is integral to nutrition education; promoting physical activity will enhance WIC nutrition education.
- ◆ WIC staff can provide education about physical activity and energy balance, and their relationship to overall health. Staff can assist participants in identifying unhealthy sedentary behaviors and appropriate activity levels.
- ◆ Promoting physical activity in the WIC educational curriculum affords the WIC program an opportunity to incorporate local cultural traditions, such as children's games specific to a culture, into its services.
- ◆ WIC staff can facilitate increased physical activity among participants by providing referrals to, and enhancing coordination with, community agencies that offer activity programs.

**LESSON LEARNED #6: Community groups were responsive but often uninformed about WIC and/or about the problem of childhood overweight. Once WIC staff approached and educated appropriate community groups, they were ready and able to participate in a community-wide overweight prevention effort. They saw WIC as a natural leader and partner in that effort.**

*Recommendation:* Establish partnerships with community agencies to develop comprehensive, community-wide interventions.

- ◆ Intervening on multiple levels in the community will increase the impact of WIC's efforts.
- ◆ Community partnerships increase the likelihood that WIC participants will receive consistent messages from their various health care providers and other community groups, thus increasing the impact of WIC's efforts.

- ◆ Partnerships can help WIC strengthen its image and build a network of community groups and professionals with similar goals.

*Recommendation:* Provide training for staff to develop the leadership skills necessary for forming community task forces or work groups. Support staff in this effort - acknowledge them for going the extra mile and serving participants in a more comprehensive way.

The recommendations described above are based on the experiences of the *Fit WIC* Project Teams and on the results of their extensive qualitative research. Although based on rigorous research methods, the qualitative research findings may be limited in the extent to which they can be generalized to other situations and contexts. However, the clinical and research experiences of the Project Teams, both individually and collectively, in the field of childhood overweight prevention are extensive. The Project Teams propose that the recommendations listed above, if followed, will prove fruitful for the WIC program and other health care agencies implementing them.

**In conclusion,** by learning from the experiences of the Five-State *Fit WIC* Project Teams, the WIC program has great potential to positively influence the prevalence of childhood overweight in our communities. The authors of this manual and everyone else who contributed to the success of the Five-State *Fit WIC* Project sincerely hope that you and your staff find this manual to be a valuable tool in your efforts to prevent childhood overweight!