

Discussing Child's Weight- Topic of the Month

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Sometimes parents come to an appointment and express concerns about a child and their weight. Maybe they feel the child is gaining too much or not enough. WIC is here to offer guidance and support to parents, but how do we start the conversation?

As we continue to explore WIC “best practices” in areas of weight and weight inclusivity, staff and students at the University of Minnesota, School of Public Health, are assisting us in the research and development of these topic areas. This information will guide our focus on training to support staff learning and developing materials for participant education.

This memo will serve as a jump start with some ways to begin the conversation with parents and help them in supporting their child's growth.

What can WIC do?

WIC has a unique position to be at the front of the line supporting families with evidence-based information, healthy foods, and referrals. We do this by working with families during an appointment to complete a nutrition assessment so we may identify and address areas of concern.

When assessing and discussing a child's weight, consider the whole picture. Since children are constantly growing, it is important to look at overall growth consistency rather than just focusing on the weight itself. Consistent growth is evidence that things are going well. If there are great fluctuations, completing the full assessment may help to identify the root cause of concern and what education and/or referrals we may offer to support the family.

Starting the conversation

Discussing weight with families can be a very sensitive topic! It is important to treat each participant's situation individually and with a participant-centered lens. The following are a few things to consider before you approach the topic of weight with the parent or guardian.

Things to consider:

- Ask what the parent has to say about growth/development, or what they say about weight gain; what concerns do they have?
- Ask about the healthcare provider's perspective; have they spoken to them?
- **Focus on overall health behaviors (eating habits, environment, and activity levels) rather than weight/BMI.**

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- Encourage parents to support their child's natural growth by avoiding feeding pressure or restrictions.
- Focus on what is going well and determine the family's interest in making a change (for tips, see the [Transition from Assessment to Goal Setting](#) memo).

The goal is to get the parent talking without offending them and get them invested in working together to determine what changes they are comfortable making to support their child's growth and development.

What should the conversation look like?

Starting the conversation with an open-ended/non-judgmental question will allow the parent to share openly if they have any concerns. Show that you are actively engaged in the conversation by affirming their responses and using reflective listening to validate that you have heard them correctly. Building trust will help the parent to feel safe when discussing an uncomfortable topic.

Examples of open-ended questions:

- How do you feel about Jamika's size?
- Tell me about Mia's eating.
- What foods are favorites of Leo?
- What has your pediatrician shared with you about George's growth?
- How do you and Amir stay active together?

Examples of probing questions:

- Has Jazmine been growing out of clothes lately? (Focus on the change in growth rather than clothing sizes.)
- Is there any reason you can think that would make Frankie's appetite increase/decrease? (Explore what may be going on at home.)
- Tell me more about Mia's eating habits.

Hold on educating until you have finished the full assessment and have a complete picture of what steps to take next. We want parents to know that we are here to collaborate with them and to offer support in meeting their goals.

Be sure to ask for permission before offering advice or referrals, and respect the parents' wishes. From there, use simple, concrete, and consistent messages to keep the conversation going in the right direction.

Start healthy habits early

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Educating families on healthy eating behaviors should start early! WIC can start as early as pregnancy, talking about the health of the newborn baby. Sharing resources, such as [Baby Behaviors](#), helps parents start to learn about recognizing and responding to their child's cues. By taking it a step further and sharing information about [A Child's Appetite](#), parents can learn their role is to determine what, when, and where to offer foods, while the child decides what and how much to eat.

Some tips for families:

- Offer the whole family the same foods and encourage the child to choose how much and if, or what, to eat.
- Be consistent with meals and snack times; offer healthy snacks regardless of if the child ate the meal.
- Allow the child to become involved in shopping, meal preparation, and cooking foods.
- Be a healthy role model. Along with choosing nutritious foods for the whole family, be active together!

The Satter Division of Responsibility (sDOR) is an excellent tool to support parents in making necessary changes to eating behaviors. With sDOR, both parent and child are responsible for food intake. Children can learn to self-regulate with support and an appropriate eating environment, and they can do this together at regular family mealtimes!

Learn more about sDOR: [Raise a healthy child who is a joy to feed.](#)

Key Takeaways:

- Growth patterns are much more meaningful than weight/BMI.
- Fostering healthy habits is the goal for participants of all body sizes.

Conversation in practice

Jenna is in today for a recertification appointment for her son, Jack. Jack's measurements have been completed, and the CPA is ready to move on to further assess the child before offering education or referrals.

TIP: The WIC Nutrition Assessment [Tools Brief Questions and Probes](#) and **Complete Questions Format** can help guide the CPA through the assessment and provide examples of questions to facilitate conversation with the participant.

CPA: Alright, Jenna, now that we have completed Jack's measurements, can I ask first if there is anything you'd like to discuss today?

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Jenna: Um, well, Jack is a picky eater. I cook meals every day, but lately all he wants to eat is peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Also, his clothes are getting so tight on him, and I worry he is gaining weight too quickly.

CPA: I understand your concerns. Although it is perfectly normal for children to choose certain foods over others, it can be frustrating. Let's take a look at how Jack has been growing since your last visit, and then we can talk more about his eating. Would that be okay with you?

Jenna: That sounds good.

CPA: I see that Jack has gotten taller since his last visit. I also see his weight has outpaced his height this last 6 months, which may be why his clothes are a bit tighter. This does happen to children from time to time. Has there been other changes aside from his love of PBJs?

Jenna: Hmmm, well we recently moved to an apartment, so we don't have a yard any longer. I have been too focused on unpacking to find an outdoor play area, but he is running around and exploring our new space.

CPA: Unpacking into a new space takes a lot of time! It will be great when things are a bit settled and you can start to explore the area as well. Has Jack been to a checkup recently?

Jenna: Jack isn't due to go to the doctor until he is four in two months.

CPA: Oh yes, four is coming quick! How about eating space, where do you eat your meals?

Jenna: Well, we have been sitting in the living room since we moved. I don't have a table for our new apartment yet, but we do sit and eat all our meals together with a blanket on the floor.

CPA: Thank you for sharing that. I may have a resource that can help with getting a table. If you are interested, I can share that before you leave today.

Jenna: Thank you, that would really help!

CPA: Great. Could you share what you have tried with getting Jack to eat other foods?

Jenna: Really, if he doesn't want what I cooked, then I let him choose what he does want, and I make it.

CPA: Okay. Let me just take a minute to check my understanding. So, you have noticed Jack has been pickier with foods and growing out of his clothes, you have moved to a new neighborhood, and you both are spending less time outdoors.

Jenna: That's about it. I think I saw a park down the block on my way here today and we are going to check that out on our way home. A friend also told me there is a way to check online for parks near me.

CPA: Oh, that is great! I bet Jack will love exploring a new park. Let's talk a bit about the eating part. Can I share a few things that I have learned about mealtimes with kiddos this age?

Jenna: Sure.

CPA: It sounds like you are doing your part by making regular meals for you and Jack and preparing a space for sitting together to eat. I love that you use a blanket on the floor; it must feel like a picnic.

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Jenna: Thanks. It does make it feel special. It would be better if he ate what I made, though.

CPA: Well, Jack's role in eating is to choose what and how much he wants to eat. He is doing that even though it is not exactly what you want him to eat. I wonder, have you tried placing a small amount of the meal that you cooked on his plate, along with a small amount of what you know he likes?

Jenna: No. I didn't want to waste food if I knew he was not going to eat it.

CPA: I get that! Ideally, this is more of an introduction to a food for him. I am talking about a very small amount, and you could even make your plate the same way, so you are eating it together. If things go well, before long, he may just welcome the foods you do offer.

Jenna: Well, I could try that, I guess, but does that really work?

CPA: I have had other families tell me that this worked well, but it didn't happen overnight! It is something that you would do at every meal, and then over time, you hope to see that he gradually starts to explore different things on the plate. With you having the same plate, you are exploring the food together, and you are modeling great eating behaviors for him.

Jenna: It would make my life easier if I could just make one thing for both of us, and I wouldn't have to worry about him eating meals when he starts school. What about his growth? You said he is gaining more weight.

CPA: Well, I shared that his weight outpaced his height, and this can be normal. I think that with getting him more active with your trips to the park and working on changes in his eating, you may see that he just naturally continues to grow at his own pace. We will check his growth again at the next appointment, but for now, let's just focus on making small changes to his eating habits and activity level.

Jenna: Okay, I think I can do that.

CPA: Great. Now, let me get you that resource I talked about that can help you with a kitchen table.

As always, remember to document what was shared at the appointment to make the next follow-up go smoothly.

Additional staff resources

[WIC Baby Behaviors Training and Tools](#)

[WIC Toddlers Behaviors](#) (Log into the [MDH Learning Center](#) to access the course.)

[Feeding and Growth](#) (Ellyn Satter Institute)

- [Support Natural Growth and Development](#)
- [Addressing Concerns About Your Child's Weight](#)

Reference – complete listing of hyperlinks

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Transition from Assessment to Goal Setting

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/wedupdate/2022/topic/0518na.pdf>)

Baby Behaviors (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/nutrition/morenutinfo.html#bb>)

A Child's Appetite

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/nutrition/english/childappetite.pdf>)

Raise a healthy child who is a joy to feed (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/>)

Tools (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html#tools>)

WIC Baby Behaviors Training and Tools

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/bb/index.html>)

WIC Toddlers Behaviors (<https://minnesota.myabsorb.com/#/online-courses/a85dd05b-7582-4b03-b756-6c6fe65c3540>)

MDH Learning Center (<https://minnesota.myabsorb.com/#/login>)

Feeding and Growth (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/feeding-growth-weight/trust-your-child/>)

Support Natural Growth and Development (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/support-growth/>)

Addressing Concerns About Your Child's Weight (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/feeding-growth-weight/addressing-weight-concerns/>)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL, MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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