

Responsive Feeding Practices- Topic of the Month

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Healthy eating starts in infancy. Babies’ brains are hard-wired to drive innate behaviors towards fulfilling their needs. At WIC, we educate participants on the basics of Baby Behaviors to give parents and caregivers a better understanding of infant cues. As infants age, their ability to communicate their needs advances. The now toddler becomes more capable of expressing their needs and can be more involved in planning day-to-day activities.

Dr. Jane Heinig expanded on her Baby Behavior research to identify **six big changes of healthy toddlers** that assist in the understanding of developmental changes that can impact mealtime. The presentation, [Understanding Your Toddler](#), will assist staff in describing these changes to participants. While viewing, staff will also get a deeper look into common toddler feeding issues and learn how WIC can help parents respond appropriately.

Six big changes in healthy toddlers

The following list highlights the “**six big changes of healthy toddlers**” that make mealtimes more challenging and may affect intake.

Toddlers:

- Growing at a slower pace; may eat less, less often.
- Practice eating using their fingers; it can be very messy as they play with food.
- Want to practice their new motor skills; always on the move, easily distracted.
- Will ask the caregiver to help them learn through pointing or babbling.
- Increasingly get better at remembering things, likes, and dislikes.
- Start to use a “script” to predict daily activities; begin anticipating next steps.

Parents' understanding of their child’s needs can lead to a positive response at mealtimes. Some parents have unrealistic expectations of toddlers’ intake at mealtimes. An example is a parent who offers portion sizes that may not be appropriate for the child’s age.

Misunderstanding a behavior leads to inappropriate feeding practices such as offering food to soothe a crying child, feeding to control activity, offering a beverage to promote sleep, or offering treats as a reward.

Responsive feeding

Responsive feeding involves an understanding between the infant/child and parent/caregiver. It can help support the development of self-regulation that affects future feeding behaviors. In addition, it can drive the [Division of Responsibility in Feeding](#) that starts in infancy and changes as the child grows.

- The infant/child signals hunger and satiety through cues (motor actions, facial expressions, or vocalization).
- The parents/caregiver recognize the cue and respond appropriately (supporting need).
- The infant/child receives a predictable response to the cue signaled.

Nonresponsive feeding

Non-responsive feeding practices can lead to parents who try to control behaviors inappropriately by addressing an unknown rather than interpreting a “cue” that indicates a simple need. This can lead to an emotional response to an unknown behavior instead of an understanding of a cue. When a caregiver does not understand that the behavior is offering a solution, such as a need to eat, then their response would be to offer an alternative. Parents or caregivers who control feedings can ultimately override the infant and child's internal hunger and satiety regulatory cues.

- The parent or caregiver taking control of feeding reflects controlling and pressuring behaviors.
- The infant or child controls the feeding, leading to indulgence.
- The parent or caregiver is uninvolved and ignores infant/child cues.

WIC's role

WIC staff can educate parents/caregivers on responsive feeding techniques leading to healthier and age-appropriate mealtimes. **Staff can help engage parents in discussion, acknowledge and explain typical toddler behaviors, and offer options to respond appropriately.** Empowering parents to make responsive choices can help decrease stress related to feeding and improve family mealtimes.

Education begins with a discussion about feeding behaviors. By practicing the “**Look, Recognize, and Respond**” ([Conversation Starters and Affirmations](#)) approach, we can engage parents to discuss specific feeding behaviors.

- **Staff engages parent; parents look at baby or child:**
 - “It looks like Sara may be trying to tell you something.”
 - “Tell me more about what you observe Sara doing.”
- **Staff explains behavior; parents recognize cues and action:**
 - “Have you seen her do this before?”
 - If yes, “How have you responded to her?”

- If no, “What do you think she is trying to tell you?”
- “Could I share what I have learned about what Sara may be trying to tell you?”
- **Staff offers realistic option; parents respond to infant or child behavior:**
 - “Would you like me to share what other parents have tried when this has happened?”
 - “It sounds like what you have tried is meeting Sara’s needs, great job!”

Use participant centered services

Conversations around feeding can be tricky. Ask parents to share their goals and opinions to help them feel comfortable. This allows the participant an opportunity to describe their motivations and reveal potential barriers. In addition, it allows you to personalize the nutrition education message and select tools to share. When you meet the participant where they are, you are less likely to make assumptions or impose advice that may be unwanted. Personalizing the message helps establish a relationship and build trust.

Tips to offer caregivers:

- Start with smaller, age-appropriate servings; offer more when requested.
- Allow the child to explore with their food; they are learning after all.
- Allow the child to regulate intake and move on when finished to the next big activity.
- Think of each feeding as a separate event; always be willing to try something new.
- Avoid labeling the child as a “picky eater”; it limits perceived options with food choices.
- Change the routine, to change the “script”; small shifts in routine can help with desired change or introduction to new foods.

WIC nutrition education tools

Sharing nutrition education cards helps reinforce the messages discussed. All caregivers involved in infant/child feeding should offer healthy foods and be responsive to feeding cues. Tools can be used to educate caregivers when they are not present at a WIC appointment.

Remember, tools should enhance, not replace, verbal communication.

- [Infants \(Nutrition Education Cards\)](#): The First Three Months; Breastfeeding Cards; Bottle Feeding Your Baby; Introducing Solid Foods; Finger Foods for Baby.
- [Children \(Nutrition Education Cards\)](#): Feeding with Confidence; Picky Eating; A Child’s Appetite.
- WIChealth.org
 - **Infant Lessons**: Understanding Your Newborn: Sleep, Crying, and Cues; Feeding Your Newborn; Feeding Your Infant on Solid Foods.

- **Children Ages 1-5 Lessons:** Feeding Your 1-Year-Old; Help Your Child Develop Healthy Eating Habit; Solving Picky Eaters.
- [Getting to Know Your Baby](#)- Baby Behavior Brochure
- [MN WIC Baby Behavior Education](#) (YouTube link - there are 27 total videos)
 - [Baby Behavior Clip Descriptions \(PDF\)](#) - Quick reference guide

Staff resources

[WIC Baby Behavior Training](#) -Located in the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Learning Center (Log in to access course)

[WIC Toddler Behavior Training](#) -Located in the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Learning Center (Log in to access course).

[WIC Baby Behaviors](#) (MDH WIC)

[Infant Nutrition and Feeding](#) (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2019)

[Feeding Guidelines for Infants and Young Toddlers: A Responsive Parenting Approach](#) (Robert Wood Foundation, 2017)

[Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Nutrition- The Thousand Day Window of Opportunity](#) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2019)

Putting it into practice

Option 1 Group Activity: Read the scenario below. Answer the questions and try to determine where to focus your education. Discuss what topics are most important to cover and what tools (if any) could be shared to enhance education.

Option 2 Individual Activity: Read through the scenario alone. Try to assess the information and answer the questions provided. Decide what education you would focus on and what tools you may share (if any).

Option 3 Virtual Group Activity: Read through the scenario alone. Contact a co-worker virtually to discuss the scenario, questions, education messages, and tools that may be used.

Scenario: Cami arrives at the WIC clinic for her midcertification appointment; she has concerns that her three-year-old, Jordan, is refusing to eat breakfast. She knows that breakfast is an important start to each day and wants her child to be healthy. Cami admits that she often does not eat breakfast herself. She finds it hard to eat when she is busy every morning with the usual routine of getting her family ready so she can get out the door for work. Cami also shared that Jordan, who recently turned three, received a new bike for his birthday, and all he wants to do is ride it around the living room all day long. Cami admits she gives him a glass of milk when he wakes up and allows him to ride his bike while she showers and gets ready for work. When Cami is ready, she offers Jordan breakfast; if he refuses, she will try a few alternatives, but often gets frustrated and gives up.

Apply the “Six Big Changes of Healthy Toddlers” to the scenario above.

Review the challenges outlined in the scenario that relate to the “six big changes of healthy toddlers” above. Think about how you might engage in discussion with the parent/caregiver, explore the typical toddler behavior(s), and offer options for responding appropriately.

Questions to ask (group or self-study)

- What things do you notice could be affecting Jordan’s desire to eat breakfast?
- What questions could you ask to probe for more information?
- What nutrition education topic(s) could you focus on?
- How will you decide which topic to discuss?
- If you decide to share tools, what one(s) will you offer?

Great job! Give yourself and your group a pat on the back for getting through a successful learning exercise.

References- complete listing of hyperlinks:

Understanding Your Toddler

(https://video.ucdavis.edu/media/Dr+Jane+Heinig+Presents+%22Understanding+Your+Toddler+%22/1_lypx45a1/213314233)

Division of Responsibility in Feeding (<https://www.ellynatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/division-of-responsibility/>)

Conversation Starters and Affirmations

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/training/bb/conversation.pdf>)

Infants (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/nutrition/tips.html#infants>)

Children (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/nutrition/tips.html#children>)

WIChealth.org (<https://www.wichealth.org/>)

Getting to Know Your Baby

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

MN WIC Baby Behavior Education

(<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnv1INVkxmtYaMmowS5oBHnbgmps7Ai1>)

WIC Baby Behavior Training (<https://minnesota.myabsorb.com/#/online-courses/2f0f5d49-c1fd-46b9-8784-7eaf63fd1bc0>)

WIC Toddler Behavior Training (<https://minnesota.myabsorb.com/#/online-courses/2f0f5d49-c1fd-46b9-8784-7eaf63fd1bc0>)

WIC Baby Behaviors

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

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Infant Nutrition and Feeding

(<https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/infant-feeding-guide.pdf>)

Feeding Guidelines for Infants and Young Toddlers: A Responsive Parenting Approach

(https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/her_feeding_guidelines_report_021416-1.pdf)

Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Nutrition- The Thousand Day Window of Opportunity

(<https://archive.cdc.gov/#/details?url=https://www.cdc.gov/grand-rounds/pp/2019/20190618-early-childhood-nutrition.html>)

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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