

# memo

**DATE:** September 15, 2021  
**TO:** Local Agency Staff  
**FROM:** State WIC Staff  
**SUBJECT:** Critical Thinking: Third in the Nutrition Assessment Series

Critical thinking is an important tool used in the understanding of participant needs during the nutrition assessment. The assessment itself helps to guide the direction of the conversation and the use of resources when educating the participant. Critical thinking helps to prioritize topics that are important to the participant and identify tools to support their goals.

Critical thinking requires the ability to observe, interpret, analyze, and form a conclusion about the information gathered. Not all information is shared verbally, some is observed, like facial expression, gestures, body language, or tone. Additionally, information may also come from things you notice, such as a mom who latches her baby confidently or a child holding a bottle filled with juice.

Quality nutrition services rely on the staff members ability to assess the participant **fully** before deciding how to appropriately address concerns that may arise during an appointment. It is most helpful if we collect all appropriate information before beginning to counsel participants. Ideally, when interpreting the information gathered, one should focus only on facts and avoid influence from personal judgement. Critical thinking allows you to then organize the information gained and decide on a course of action.

Most people use critical thinking to solve problems every day. Below are the 5 components used in critical thinking at WIC.

**The 5 basic components to critical thinking:**

1. **Collect all pertinent information;** including the *objective data* (measurements, blood work, etc.), details gained from discussions with the participant, clues from observing the participant (*subjective data*) and any other relevant information.
2. **Ask additional questions;** clarify responses while disregarding irrelevant information.
3. **Recognize which factors contribute;** include identifying relationships between behaviors and nutritional risks.
4. **Consider the participant's point of view;** discuss nutrition and health priorities, needs, and concerns. Remain open-minded and avoid stereotyping participants.
5. **Check for accuracy;** determine if there are unusual or inconsistent measurements.

Each component alone is a skill in itself, but when combined together, they allow for the ability to get a better understanding of what is happening and how to best address the situation. One challenging part is determining what information is relevant to the nutrition assessment and what is best addressed by a referral. It is the responsibility of WIC educators to address only nutrition related topics; non-nutrition topics such as mental health, child development, or medical advice, should be referred to the appropriate professional.

Each step in the [New Staff Training Plan](#) (NST Plan) is designed to aid staff in skill building. The nutrition assessment is the first step in practicing critical thinking skills. To become an expert in critical thinking, continuing education along with practice help staff to build and maintain the level of knowledge necessary to consistently provide quality service with participants. It is important to remember that this takes time! With practice, a CPA will build the skills needed to become proficient in demonstrating sound judgement and utilizing the tools that are available to support WIC participants.

### **Practicing Critical Thinking**

**Scenario:** Sarah arrives to the clinic with a crying two-year-old. It is December, the child (Kimmy) is wrapped in a blanket. Sarah needed to schedule a mid-certification appointment and just arrived in clinic to “get more benefits”. Sarah apologizes, she wanted to call for an appointment, but with no transportation herself, it is hard to know when she will get a ride. Sarah’s neighbor had an appointment today and brought her along.

#### **Staff Example:**

**CPA:** “Hi Sarah, welcome. It looks like Kimmy needed an appointment; would you have time to meet with someone today?”

**Participant:** Sarah agrees to meet with a staff member and adds that since she was in a hurry this morning, she did not have time to grab something Kimmy can eat so she hopes this will be quick.

**CPA:** Okay, give me a few minutes and we can get started. I understand you’re worried Kimmy may get hungry, and I know you have someone waiting. This appointment should take about 20 minutes, would you like to let your ride know?”

**NOTE:** *Participants may not always arrive when they are expected but it is important to assist them if you are able. Be sure to share what is expected to reduce frustration on both ends.*

**CPA:** “Sarah, I can take you back now. If it is okay with you, I would like to get Kimmy’s measurements while we continue talking. That will help move things right along.”

**CPA:** “So, Sarah, tell me about how mealtimes have been going for Kimmy?”

**Participant:** Sarah shares that lately Kimmy has been refusing breakfast and then will suddenly become hungry at random times.

[You complete the measurements and notice that Kimmy is growing very consistently over time. Her hemoglobin is 11.9. You complete the Nutrition Assessment. Sarah’s main concern is Kimmy’s refusal to eat breakfast. Using your critical thinking skills, you decide to explore

Kimmy's refusal to eat. Reflections and probing questions help identify contributing factors to Kimmy's refusal to eat and to better understand Sarah's perspective on the situation.]

**CPA:** "It is hard when our children refuse to eat."

**Participant:** Sarah agrees that she is frustrated. She wonders if offering Pediasure would help.

**NOTE:** *WIC only allows Pediasure when it is medically indicated, and medical documentation is provided.*

**CPA:** "Could you tell me a little more about why you feel Kimmy needs Pediasure?"

**Participant:** Sarah shares that Kimmy really loves to drink her milk even if she refuses food. Sarah's sister offers Pediasure to her child instead of milk, and he is way bigger than Kimmy.

**CPA:** "I see, could I share a few things with you that may help with your decision?"

"Great, to start, all children grow differently. Kimmy is at an age where she is growing much more slowly than she did the first year. It is also completely normal for children in this age range to exert independence at mealtime and sometimes that means refusing to eat. The important thing is that you offer her the food she needs, and let her decide when and how much she takes in."

**Participant:** Oh wow, that makes a lot of sense. So, what about Pediasure? Doesn't it give her extra vitamins too?

**CPA:** "Pediasure is a supplemental beverage typically used for a child who is very underweight or may have a medical condition. Looking at Kimmy's growth and her hemoglobin she seems to be very healthy."

"Given what I have shared about changes in growth and eating, do you still think Kimmy would benefit from Pediasure?"

**Participant:** Sarah agrees that no, Pediasure is not right for Kimmy. She wonders if you can suggest some healthy snacks that would be easy for on-the-go.

**CPA:** "Absolutely, WIC has many resources for healthy meals and snacks. If you look on the website or app you can find a link for recipes and food tips there. I can also share with you the Nutrition Education Card "Healthy Choices for Kids". This will give you something to review at home as well. All of the education cards and some tips and recipes are available right from the WIC app, if you are interested in checking out more information."

**Participant:** Sarah shares her appreciation. She says that this will really help her, especially since she so often has to walk to the local convenience mart to grab what she can for groceries, and it is hard to know how to what she can throw together to make a meal or snack.

**CPA:** "I hear your frustration! It is great that you have such a helpful neighbor, having resources really helps when you have limited transportation. Since your neighbor also receives WIC, have you considered making her a proxy? This may be a way that you can help one another in the future."

**Participant:** Sarah says that is a great idea, she plans to ask her neighbor if that would work for her as well.

[You remember that Kimmy did not have a jacket on when they arrived and know of a resource you could offer to Sarah.]

**CPA:** "Perfect. One more thing I wanted to share; you may have seen the flyer outside the door on your way in today. The local food shelf is giving out free winter jackets this week. Would you be interested in having the contact information for them?"

**NOTE:** *Recognizing the participant's needs is essential to quality service. While often it takes probing questions to get to the need, some things are apparent. Using tools such as Participant Centered Counseling ([PCS Training and Tools](#)) can be an effective way to build rapport and break down barriers in trust.*

**CPA:** "I am glad we were able to get your appointment done today. Thank you for your openness about your concerns with Kimmy's eating and I am so glad I was also able to help with the connection to getting Kimmy a new coat. I will write down the contact information for the food shelf. One more thing, knowing that transportation is an issue for you right now, I can share that WIC can renew your benefits and do some parts of the appointment right over the phone. This may make it easier for you in the future to connect with the nutrition staff by phone rather than having to come to the clinic every time."

**NOTE:** *When providing education and resources, be open with the options available. Building on participant trust helps to reinforce the positive messages you have provided when discussing/addressing the individual regarding nutrition and health and offering solutions that best fit their needs.*

## Resources

[MOM Section 5.3: Nutrition Risk Assessment](#)

[Nutrition Assessment Module](#)

[Participant-Centered Nutrition Assessment Webinar](#) (Altarum Webinar 10/2020)

[Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment \(VENA\) Guidance](#) (USDA WIC Works Resource System)

[WIC Learning Online Job Aid- Critical Thinking Pathway](#)

## References- Complete Listing of Hyperlinks:

[New Staff Training Plan](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/training/nutrition/nst/plan.docx>)

[WIC PCS Training and Tools](#)

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

[Section 5.3: Nutrition Risk Assessment](#)

([https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/program/mom/chsctns/ch5/sctn5\\_3.pdf](https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/program/mom/chsctns/ch5/sctn5_3.pdf))

[Nutrition Assessment Module](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/training/nutrition/nst/dietary.pdf>)

Participant-Centered Nutrition Assessment Webinar  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcaDPb1ERyU>)

Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA) Guidance  
(<https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/value-enhanced-nutrition-assessment-vena-guidance>)

WIC Learning Online Job Aid- Critical Thinking Pathway  
([https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/Critical%20Thinking\\_508c.pdf](https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/Critical%20Thinking_508c.pdf))

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