

# memo

**DATE:** March 16, 2022  
**TO:** Local Agency Staff  
**FROM:** State WIC Staff  
**SUBJECT:** Asking Permission: Ninth in a Nutrition Assessment Series

## Can we talk about asking permission?

WIC staff are inherently caring people. It is natural to be eager to help participants and share nutrition advice. This “righting reflex”, paired with the time-limited nature of WIC appointments, can easily steer the counselor into assuming the lead in the interaction and sharing information too quickly.

In the spirit of Participant Centered Services (PCS), asking permission allows the nutrition counselor to maintain a partnership with the participant and keep them in the driver’s seat. This method allows the counselor to share, while still respecting the autonomy of the participant.

It can feel awkward to ask permission during an appointment since this is not typically done in everyday conversation. With practice, this technique can be seamlessly incorporated into nutrition counseling sessions and feel very comfortable. Asking permission can be paired effectively with other counseling techniques, such as affirmations and reflections.

### **Asking and receiving permission can take many forms.**

Here are some ways permission may appear in a WIC appointment and examples of each.

#### **1. The participant asks for information**

When a participant directly asks for information or advice, they are inherently providing permission for you to share. The counselor may still choose to ask permission as they explore the topic and determine the best way to proceed.

- *Participant: “So, how much juice should I be giving every day?”*  
*Counselor: “Sure, let’s talk about that. Would you like to take a look at our information card together?”*

#### **2. The counselor asks for permission**

The counselor can ask for permission to discuss a certain topic or share a piece of information that the participant hasn’t requested or expressed interest in. Gaining permission is also helpful when bringing up a sensitive issue, offering a concern, or addressing discord. Remember, written materials are also considered advice!

- *“Can we talk a little bit about...”*
- *“If you’re comfortable sharing, I’m interested in hearing more about...”*
- *“May I share an observation?”*
- *“Would you like to go over those recommendations?”*
- *“I can share some ideas that have worked for other families.”*
- *“It sounds like it would be helpful to go through those recommendations. Is that ok with you?”*

### 3. The counselor includes language of choice

Encompassing your information in the language of choice is another way to honor the participant’s autonomy. This method doesn’t explicitly ask permission, but instead invites their feedback and allows for them to disregard or disagree. Avoid the temptation to give veiled advice within your question. This technique is best used after good rapport has been established.

- *“This might not work for you, but something others have done...”*
- *“It sounds like it would be helpful to talk more about that.”*
- *“Thanks for sharing that. Tell me more.”*

### The permission Goldilocks – not too much, not too little.

Permission does not need to be obtained every time the counselor speaks. Instead, consider asking permission before introducing something from the counselor’s agenda. This could be initiating a topic of discussion, sharing an idea or observation, or providing information or advice. Within a typical WIC appointment, natural places to ask for permission from the participant are while setting the agenda, introducing topics during the nutrition assessment, and providing nutrition education.

For example, the counselor may say near the beginning of the nutrition assessment *“Can we talk about your pregnancy? I’d love to hear how it’s been going.”* If the participant agrees to share and remains open during the conversation, the remainder of the assessment may not need further permission until the education portion of the appointment.

Alternatively, if the participant shows reluctance around some topics, the counselor may find it valuable to add permission statements, such as *“You mentioned that your appetite has changed. Can you tell me more about that?”* or *“Thanks for sharing that. Would you mind also telling me about...?”*. Notice the participant’s reaction to know if you need to ask permission more or less often.

### The participant said “no” when I asked permission. What do I do now?

Respect the participant’s wishes. This information can help inform your assessment of their readiness for change, preferences, or counseling approach. As you move forward with the appointment, it may be helpful to use this opportunity for a reflection and allow the participant

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to steer the conversation to a more comfortable subject. If a reflection doesn't feel appropriate, simply acknowledge their response and move on.

- *"This is a difficult topic for you."*
- *"You'd rather talk about something else."*
- *"You know yourself. That isn't helpful for you."*

## Discussion questions

- What are some ways that you give in to your "righting reflex"?
- What phrasing could you use to ask permission to discuss a sensitive topic?
- How can you ask permission to share a concern you've identified in your assessment?
- You have an idea that you feel strongly will help the participant. How do you proceed?

## Resources

Molly Kellogg [Tip #147 Providing Advice Effectively](https://mollykellogg.com/tip147/) (https://mollykellogg.com/tip147/)

Molly Kellogg [Tip #151 Taming Your Righting Reflex](https://mollykellogg.com/tip-151-taming-your-righting-reflex/) (https://mollykellogg.com/tip-151-taming-your-righting-reflex/)

Minnesota WIC PCS Webinars- 2016: [Resistance - May 2016](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/skills/webinars/index.html#may20162)  
(https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/skills/webinars/index.html#may20162)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 85 E 7<sup>th</sup> Place, PO BOX 64882, ST PAUL MN 55164-0882; 1-800-657-3942, [health.wic@state.mn.us](mailto:health.wic@state.mn.us), [www.health.state.mn.us](http://www.health.state.mn.us); to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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