

## Moving Beyond Knowledge in Nutrition Education to Facilitate Behavior Change

WIC nutrition education aims to help clients make behavior changes that promote positive health outcomes. Research has indicated that people need **more than knowledge** to make behavior changes, but determining exactly what people need is difficult. This is a complex question with no easy answer. Think back to a personal behavior change, where there were likely many factors in achieving success. Research has identified three key factors needed in nutrition education in order to support behavior change:

1. **Enhancing motivation:** “Why to” change
2. **Providing information and skills to act:** “How to” change
3. **Creating a support system:** Social and environmental support

Thus, designing nutrition education that goes **beyond knowledge** involves addressing what **motivates** and **supports** clients to make healthy lifestyle choices. This section explains each of these three factors and how they relate to planning WIC nutrition education activities.

### **1) Enhancing Motivation – “Why to” Change**

In order to make changes, people need motivation. In other words, most of us ask ourselves “why should I change” before seriously considering a change. Nutrition educators who incorporate motivational educational strategies are more likely to facilitate client behavior change. While there is no magic formula for what will motivate someone toward healthier behavior, most people respond more when feelings and attitudes are involved versus focusing only on facts and information. Overall, enhancing motivation in nutrition education means helping clients figure out a reason “why to” change that is relevant and meaningful.

Below are several key things that may motivate clients:

- Exploring **feelings, attitudes and beliefs** about behaviors
- Increasing client **awareness** about behaviors through self-assessment activities such as food checklists or activity records
- Exploring pros and cons of behaviors to help participants explore and resolve **ambivalence** about trying a new behavior
- Addressing **social norms** by discussing the impact of peers and media on behavior choices
- Providing opportunities for clients to think about perceived **benefits and barriers** for behaviors
- Helping clients overcome barriers and increase self confidence, or **self-efficacy**, to make a change

\*Think outside the box for inspiration. Songs, testimonials, videos, or media clips can make nutrition education more relevant and “hooked into” the clients’ real world experiences.

See the chart that follows for more specific ideas of how to incorporate motivational activities into lessons.

## **2) Providing Information and Skills to Act – “How to” Change**

In addition to motivation, or “why to” change, people also need information and skills to take action. In other words, once someone decides to make a change, they may need specific information about the steps they can take to be successful. In nutrition education, this will likely involve addressing food and nutrition specific knowledge and skills.

Activities that may help clients gain skills to act include:

- Discussing relevant nutrition-related information
- Building skills in food preparation and cooking
- Practicing **critical thinking** skills to help clients make healthy choices
- Providing opportunities for clients to practice setting realistic **goals**
- Encouraging **self-monitoring** of food intake and activity in order to increase clients’ sense of control over eating and activity behaviors

\*Think about previous learned skills (e.g. riding a bike, baking a cake, changing a flat tire). What helped in learning the steps and becoming confident in doing the behavior? Keep this in mind when planning learning activities.

See the chart that follows for more specific ideas of how to incorporate skill-building activities into lessons.

## **3) Creating a Support System**

Support is crucial for making and sustaining behavior change. Support may come in the form of social support from friends and family or environmental support that facilitates healthy lifestyle choices.

By creating opportunities for participants to discuss experiences during classes, WIC nutrition educators help build social support among clients. By linking participants to appropriate referrals, WIC also serves a valuable role in connecting WIC participants with support outlets.

See the chart that follows for more specific ideas of how to address support in WIC nutrition education.

Additional information on social support is also available later in this module.

Below are a few examples of types of activities that address each concept:

Nutrition Education Concept	Examples of Activities
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow parents to discuss attitudes and feelings, and share experiences with each other.</li> <li>• Discuss benefits of healthy behaviors.</li> <li>• Integrate inspirational props, such as pictures, to evoke emotions.</li> <li>• Allow participants to discuss family members' experiences with diabetes or heart disease, and community disease rate statistics.</li> </ul>
Skills & Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide relevant nutrition information.</li> <li>• Troubleshoot ways to overcome barriers to change.</li> <li>• Design activities on reading food labels, choosing healthy snacks, cooking skills, etc.</li> </ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss how to develop a positive change support system. (Example: Identifying an exercise buddy)</li> <li>• Map out places in the community to exercise or find inexpensive fruits and vegetables.</li> </ul>

### **Applying Concepts of Motivation, Knowledge/Skills and Support to WIC Nutrition Education**

As nutrition educators make more efforts to incorporate these concepts, clients will be more successful in making healthy lifestyle choices. Furthermore, lessons that incorporate multiple motivational activities in addition to information/skills are more likely to be enjoyable. Think about the following lesson makeover as an example of how to incorporate more than just knowledge in nutrition education:

#### **Lesson Makeover Example for Applying the Concepts to a Lesson**

Consider a class involving lecture and video on offering children fruits and vegetables. A nutritionist may stand up in front of the room and lecture about the importance feeding fruits and vegetables to children, and then show a video about recommended daily amounts. This type of class is based on passive learning techniques that do not engage participants. It is also information-heavy without addressing things likely to motivate clients to prepare and serve fruits and vegetables.

Think about ways to adapt this lesson to include a combination of 1) motivational activities that address “why-to” change, 2) skill-building activities that address “how-to” change, and 3) activities to build support. For example, the class described above might include activities such as:

- Asking clients to partner up and discuss benefits and challenges of serving their children fruits and vegetables (motivational activity).
- Taste test of fruits and vegetables (motivational activity)
- Assessing a sample day's meal plan and identifying ways to include more fruits and vegetables (self assessment activity to increase skills)
- Goal-setting activity to identify one specific change to try (goal setting/skill-building activity)
- Identifying a person to support them with this change (social support).

Overall, educational opportunities at WIC should be fun for participants and incorporate a variety of learning opportunities. More information on lesson development will be covered in depth in Module 4 of this toolkit.

Reference:

Contento, I. R. (2007). Nutrition Education: Linking Research, Theory, and Practice. Sudberry, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

### **Glossary of Terms**

**Motivation:** a reason or incentive to do something

**Feelings:** an emotion, sensation, or perception

**Attitudes:** a personal view or opinion about something, a tendency

**Beliefs:** acceptance that something is true or real, often accompanied by emotional or spiritual sense of certainty

**Awareness:** knowledge of something through having observed it or been told about it

**Ambivalence:** presence of two opposing ideas, attitudes, or emotions at the same time

**Social Support:** physical and emotional support given to us by family, friends, and others

**Social Norms:** expectations within a society or group

**Self-Efficacy:** belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner; self confidence

**Critical Thinking:** mental process of analyzing information to reach an answer or conclusion

**Self-Monitoring:** systematically observing one's own behavior; self-observation