

FACILITATING WIC DISCUSSION GROUPS

GUIDELINES, CONCEPTS, AND TECHNIQUES

Providing Discussion Sessions for WIC participants is an attempt to provide them with a more meaningful nutrition education experience that involves interactive learning. As the WIC Nutritionist or paraprofessional, you will be the facilitator and moderate a group conversation-style discussion.

The WIC participants take on an active role in this learning process by letting you know what information they need at this stage of their life (or their childrens'), and by sharing with you and the other members of the group what they have experienced. Learning becomes more effective when they learn from each other as well as from the information you can share with them, especially since it is information that is relevant to their needs. Sessions will vary in content and style, depending on the session objective(s), the specific topics that the participants bring up, and the personalities of the participants involved.

Here are some specific guidelines and techniques to help facilitation of WIC Discussion Groups:

*** Build Your Group From Within.**

Assure the members that this is their group, and that it will be structured to fit their needs and concerns.

*** Establish Group Norms Or "Ground Rules".**

For example: set the time, agenda, and length of sessions; establish rules on confidentiality and sharing of group responsibilities; and clarify procedural issues, especially listening to others and respecting ideas or comments of others. Allow the group to establish its own norms, which need to be acceptable to all members of the group.

*** Begin Each Session With A Check-in.**

This is not a rigid rule, but often useful in many groups. For example, this could involve an "icebreaker" where every member of the group shares -- perhaps a brief statement of who you are, the child's name and age, any special needs of the child, and anything new that has happened over the last month. The main objective is to help participants feel comfortable and safe in expressing their concerns.

Delivering The Opening Question.

Silence and hesitancy are normal in the early stages of a discussion. Before or after delivering your first open-ended question (see below), you can prepare the group for this usual period of silence by telling them it's okay to take a moment to think of their response. If the silence continues past what you would consider to be normal, you can ask or guess aloud about what it may mean. Also, you can voice the fact that "it's sometimes hard to be the first to respond," or pick someone you know will be comfortable answering the question.

Ask Open-Ended Questions.

This is a skill that gets people involved in describing their own experiences as they relate to the session objective(s). A conversation should then develop that flows naturally and spontaneously. Asking open-ended questions is the most direct way to find out what it is that these particular WIC participants need to talk about. These questions must be worded so that people do not feel they are being interrogated, yet should enable you to find out important and specific information.

An open-ended question is one which cannot be answered by a "yes" or "no" which would only give you only a minimum of information and close the conversation. There are no right or wrong answers to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions require more informative answers and are the same questions a good news reporter asks: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, How Much, How Often.

In asking open-ended questions, you must take care not to pose too many questions in sequence which can make people feel they are being interrogated. If you set up a friendly atmosphere from the beginning, this will encourage participants to talk on a conversational level rather than just answering a series of questions. Also, balance your use of open-ended questions with the other facilitating skills such as clarifying or focusing.

Guide The Discussion.

To facilitate means to allow things to happen and to make them easy. The facilitator is a moderator, allowing others to speak and then gently bringing topics to a conclusion. At the same time, you must stay in control of the discussion and avoid it becoming a "free for all". If that happens, the quieter people will not have the opportunity to be heard, and no one will learn anything. Here are some specific points to bear in mind when guiding the discussion:

- Guide the discussion by throwing out topics to be discussed, so that it doesn't lose momentum, and keep the topic focused on the session's objective(s).
- Actively encourage participants to give more information and better define their situations, as well as focus on specific concerns. The conversation will need to be "directed" in order to better pinpoint issues and feelings on which the participants would like to concentrate.
- Recognize fears, prejudices, and disagreement, and bring them out into the open.
- Look for feedback - yawns, stretching and other feedback which indicate whether or not people are listening.
- Avoid letting group members monopolize "air time". To someone dominating the discussion, you can say "your points are really interesting, but we also need to discuss some other issues. Why don't you catch me after this session, or call me tomorrow, and we can talk some more" - or however you can say this without embarrassing the person.
- Avoid strong agreement or disagreement over a subject that leaves the impression that there's no sense discussing it.
- Find ways to limit continual complaining or blaming of others.

Encourage Participation.

Ways to reinforce the importance of each participant's contribution and encourage them to take part are:

- Focus on the person who is speaking; pay close attention to her (or him).
- If someone speaks too softly, repeat their question and/or comments to the group before replying.
- Give positive reinforcement and feedback to every person who speaks; a nod of the head or word of praise will encourage that person to speak again.
- Watch for non-verbal signs that may indicate someone else's desire to respond or ask a question.
- Use words which everyone is familiar with; avoid technical or medical terms.
- Check the seating arrangement to make sure the circle will include everyone.

Focus On Topics.

Focusing emphasizes a particular subject that you think would be helpful to the group to explore (or rather, the group has made it obvious to you that they want it to be further explored). Commonly, a specific topic (or topic area) repeatedly surfaces in the flow of the conversation, in which case it may seem natural to further discuss and clarify it. This may happen spontaneously, or as the facilitator, you may need to ask more open-ended questions relating to the specific issue. The purpose of focusing the conversation in this case would be to help everyone better understand and further express their feelings about an issue that they have shown is relevant to them.

Another reason to focus the discussion would be to help make sense of a conversation that has ended up rambling, jumping from topic to topic without any sense of clarification, or has become unrelated to the session's objective(s). When the conversation seems to have confused both yourself and the participants, it is time to get things back in focus. To do this, you could select one particular point to repeat or condense a number of points into a selective summary in order to concentrate on how the participants are feeling, how their babies or children have been acting, etc.

Focus On Feelings.

Place primary emphasis on the feelings or experiences of each group member. Avoid debating ideas; this is a place for support and information sharing.

Practice Active Listening.

Some people tend to speak more than listen. Listening is a technique that can be developed beyond the everyday practice we are all familiar with. It means that you must be silent and allow the participants to talk. We are all guilty of sometimes listening with half an ear to the speaker while busily figuring out what to say next, or how to change the subject to something we would rather talk about. However, in order to help someone, you must listen carefully to what they are saying and avoid the temptation to intervene with your own thoughts and interests. Many times someone has mixed feelings or several concerns, and may need more time to talk before you can be sure of how they really feel. Listening skills can give you this time. Encourage group members to listen to and understand what other group members are saying.

Clarify.

This simply means making a point clear. To do this, you will first need to use your listening skills to help gather enough information about what a person has said to clearly understand their message and to restate what you heard. This involves becoming an "active" listener, encouraging people to respond to your interpretation of their statements and then showing acceptance of what they have said.

Stay With The Speaker.

When one person is speaking, stay with that person until they are finished, rather than allowing other members to interrupt or take the floor. Discourage side conversations.

Accept People As They Are.

Effective learning and comfortable communication can only occur when there is an atmosphere of acceptance. The trick here is to learn to accept and respect someone's feelings without necessarily agreeing with their point of view. Respond to the feelings that are behind the comments being made; realize that you don't have to "teach" something, but are here to listen to, talk with and learn something from the participants and their experiences.

Dealing With Strong Feelings, Doubts And Disagreements.

Strive to be sensitive to the feelings of others; lead the group to share their knowledge and experience without telling others what they should do. Make sure that participants' experiences and solutions to their own problems are offered to the others as "possibilities and suggestions" rather than dictating only one way to do it.

*** Dealing With Erroneous Information.**

When someone's input to the group discussion includes incorrect information, you can make a statement that emphasizes the worth of their experience and your respect for their decision, whether you agree with it or not. Some possible responses which avoid embarrassing the person are:

-- "I'm very glad that worked for you. Other people have found that _____ worked better for them".

- "I'm very glad that worked for you, but all the references we've seen do not recommend it".
- "I'm glad you brought that up. That "used" to be what was generally recommended, but now new research has found that..."
- "You've brought up a really interesting issue. Let's look it up in (a specific reference) and see what they say about it".
- "That's too bad. What could you have done differently if you had the information we have talked about today?"

Summarize The Discussion.

As much as possible, bring ideas together, highlight certain conversations or repeat relevant information, and complete one topic before going on to another. Some groups find it helpful to end the session with each participant sharing what the session has meant to them, and what they learned or discovered during the session. This way, the group can see that their input and shared experiences helped everyone to learn something (it can be particularly valuable for them to realize that they even helped you, the facilitator, learn something new!).

*** Assist Members In Gaining Resources.**

Provide sources of additional information such as pamphlets, videos, or by referral.

*** Above All -- Have Fun!**

Remember that it takes time for a group to grow and develop trust. Be patient and never define success by the number of people attending the session. Enjoy yourself and the group members, and encourage them to do the same.

ICEBREAKER EXERCISES

Introduction

What are icebreakers? How do they differ from openers? Both are starter activities -- activities that help you "warm up" your clients and get them used to the idea of actively participating in the class.

* Icebreakers:

These are exercises that are not related to the topic of the session. For example, if your Discussion Session is focusing on the importance of breastfeeding, an icebreaker exercise might be one client interviewing another about her favorite colors, and why. The two would then switch the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Both will then share with the class what they've discovered about the other person. Icebreakers are useful when clients don't know each other. They get shy people involved, and help clients overcome feelings of isolation or loneliness by getting to know another person.

* Openers:

These are similar to icebreakers, but they are activities related to the session topic. For example, if the Discussion Session is about the importance of breastfeeding, you might have clients interview each other about their opinions on breastfeeding. If you have your clients share their opinions as you list the issues on the blackboard, you can then use the list to begin talking about the importance of breastfeeding. Like icebreakers, openers help people get to know something unique about each other and get people involved in participating.

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Using an icebreaker or opener sends the message that the clients will play an active role in your sessions -- that this is not another "lecture" or "just sit and listen" class. Some icebreakers/openers take longer than others and may or may not be useful depending on session size. Icebreakers/openers also help the instructor feel less nervous! However, you should choose the icebreakers/openers that you feel comfortable doing.

The following pages include descriptions of various icebreakers/ openers. You can use these, but feel free to develop your own icebreaker/opener by adapting any of the ones listed.

* Introductions via Interviewing One Another

- Have clients find a partner.
- Have them take turns interviewing the other person. Interview questions can include name, number of children, hobbies, where they're from, where they work or have worked, etc.
- An interesting interview topic could be their given names.
 - *Does the client like their name?*
 - *Why or why not?*
 - *Is it a family tradition?*
 - *Would you trade it for another name?*
 - *Will it/did it affect what you will name your children?*

The facilitator should interview/be interviewed as well!

- After 5 minutes, have them share with the class what they learned about that person.

Note: If the class is large and sharing their findings with the class would take too long, divide clients into groups of four and have them take turns interviewing each other within the group. Omit the final step (above).

This activity could also serve as a useful opener for different topics. For example, in the interview, they could ask one another about their opinions on breastfeeding, how their pregnancy is going so far, what eating habits they've changed or kept the same during their pregnancy, how they feed their infant and why, what questions they have about feeding children, what successes/problems have they had in feeding their child, etc. Responses to these questions could be listed on a blackboard or flipchart and serve as the basis for initiating session discussion.

* Going Around the Room to Introduce Yourself

Have clients give first names and a bit of information about themselves. Information could be unrelated to the topic of the class (for example: baby's due date, number of kids, what kind of day they're having, favorite food, funniest thing their kid has said or done, etc.). Or, the topic could be related directly to the discussion session (best thing about breastfeeding, what kind of advice you would give to another mother about what to feed their child, how your eating has changed now that you're pregnant, etc.). This strategy is useful when there is a small group or limited time.

* Working As A Group to Define Goals

- Divide clients into groups of three or four.
- Have clients introduce themselves to the other people in their group.
- Within each group, have clients discuss what they hope to get out of this session.
- Have clients make a list of what they want to get out of the session. The facilitator should list goals on flipchart or blackboard.
- Goals can be used to determine topics for the group to cover in the session.

This activity can also be used as an opener. For example, in a session for pregnant women discussing breastfeeding, have each group come up with a list of advantages and disadvantages of breastfeeding. Have groups share their lists with other groups in the session. The lists can be used as a starting point for the discussion session. Other group topics could include questions such as:

- *"What advice would you give to a mother who wants to know about feeding infants?"*
- *"What should you eat during pregnancy?"*
- *"What about feeding children?"*
- *"What about making baby food?"*
- *"What about breastfeeding?"*

* Me and My Food

- Have clients, on their own, answer the following questions by writing or drawing pictures. Give them a few minutes to complete the questions.
- Have them find a partner and share their answers.

1) *My favorite food is* _____.

2) *My favorite food when I'm sick is* _____.

3) *My favorite food when I was a child was* _____.

4) *My favorite vegetable is* _____.

5) *My favorite snack food is* _____.

6) *The food I dislike the most is* _____.

(Make this into a handout to make the exercise easier for the client. Provide pens or pencils if possible).

*** Flower Exercise**

In the petals of the flower drawn on the next page, have clients describe themselves. Write one thought on each petal. Examples are:

-- *I am a single mother.*

-- *I have three sons.*

-- *I like to paint.*

-- *I like ice cream.*

-- *I like summertime.*

-- *Christmas is my favorite holiday.*

-- *I would like to have a dog as a pet.*

-- *I am seven months pregnant.*

-- *I am a breastfeeding mom.*

-- *I'm feeling tired today.*

-- *I'd like to learn more about what I should feed my child.*

-- *I'm not sure I want to breastfeed.*

-- *I have a colicky baby.*

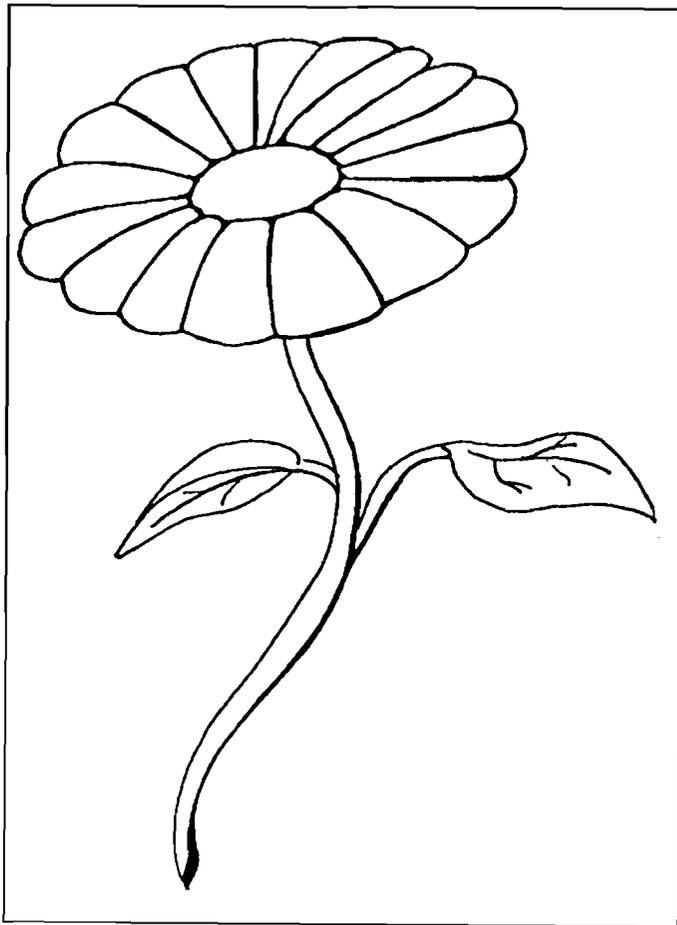
-- *I like watching soap operas on TV.*

-- *I am in the 11th grade.*

(You may have to give the clients some ideas.)

Give the class a few minutes to fill in their flower. Then have the clients find partners. Have them compare their flowers to see what they have in common.

You can also use this technique to have them write down and discuss their feelings about the class topic. For example, what are their thoughts about breastfeeding? What kinds of advice would they give about feeding an infant solids?



FLOWER

(If there are children present, give them a flower handout to draw or color).

* Telephone Game

This is the same game you might have played as a kid in which one person whispers a message to another person, and that person then whispers it to the next person in line, and so on down the line. The fun part is seeing if the message makes it all the way down the line correctly.

The facilitator gives the message. This should be a nutritional statement relating to the class topic. For example:

- *"Babies should never be put to bed with a bottle because it causes tooth decay."*
- *"Breastfeeding moms should drink plenty of liquids in a day."*

The message can be used to initiate the topic for the class.

