

Family- Centered Education

Introduction

In 2002, California WIC agencies were involved in introducing a new type of group education session, called **Family-Centered Education (FCE)**. To field test this approach, a group of five WIC agencies designed and experimented with lesson plans and activities that engaged parents or other caregivers with children together in a group setting. During the statewide pilot phase completed in the fall of 2002, 18 agencies participated in training and delivery of family-centered group education sessions in their local communities. These agencies presented lessons for families on gardening, “5 a day”, and shopping. They found that families enjoyed learning together and staff enjoyed the new way to teach.

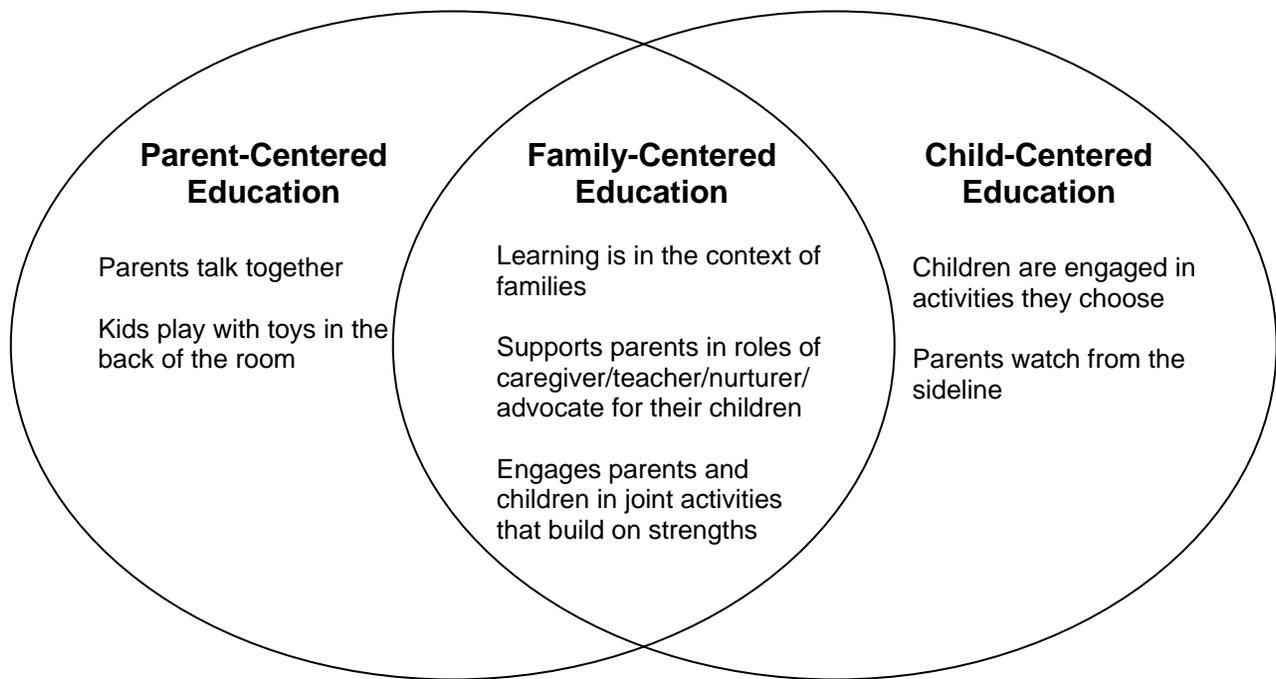
What is “Family- Centered Education”?

Family-centered education is most easily understood by considering three different types of education shown in the diagram on the next page. All three types are valuable, and all can be used effectively in WIC agencies. The first is **parent-centered**. With this model, the WIC educator talks with the parents and offers education at their level. Sometimes the children may attend, but they are often provided separate activities while their parents are in class (for example, coloring sheets or blocks to play with in a corner of the room.) These child-appropriate activities keep the children occupied while their parents learn.

The second type of education is **child-centered**. With this model, children direct the learning. They choose what they want to learn (often from a limited number of choices) and then direct the way that the “lesson” will go. Adults are engaged as helpers and facilitators. This is what we often see during free play time in a pre-school setting. The child selects something to play with and then explores it in whatever way most interests that child. A child may select a plastic fruit or vegetable from a basket, and then create from it a pretend airplane that flies through the waiting room.

Family-centered education (FCE) explicitly teaches to the whole family. Activities are designed for children and parents to do together. This style of group learning acknowledges the central role families play in the growth and development of their children. In family-centered education

- WIC parents and children have fun learning together
- WIC parents help their children develop skills for school
- WIC parents strengthen their parenting skills



**Learning
Together
about
Nutrition**

Families are faced with many decisions that influence their health and nutrition practices. If a parents or caregivers are enrolled in WIC they may be looking for ways to prevent health problems and improve the health of their own families. We know that building healthy nutrition practices in a family is hard work. In WIC family-centered education children and parents explore nutrition topics together by sharing stories, participating in hands-on activities and trying out new ideas. By learning together, parents and children share common experiences that they can take back to their homes and communities. This learning together process can also be fun. For the WIC educator, the emphasis is less on providing specific information and more on building a positive environment where children and their caregivers can explore nutrition and health in a playful way. And in this way, nutrition and health are being put directly back in the context where decisions are made – in the family.

**School
Readiness**

Parents, teachers and policy makers have been thinking about what it takes for children to be “ready for school.” Advocates for children at the national, state, and local levels have been looking at ways to help children get ready for school and nurture an eagerness to learn in all young children.

As a WIC educator you play a very important role in nurturing school readiness and helping parents to encourage – in children – a natural eagerness to learn. You help parents in their role of primary caregivers, nurturers, educators, and advocates for their children. As you work with families in family-centered education sessions you will have many opportunities to talk about kindergarten readiness, model ways that parents can help their children to build skills at home, and be a resource person when they have questions or concerns.

The WIC Family-Centered Education lessons each contain important elements of kindergarten readiness. You will see that the content of each lesson is related to nutrition, health, and the role families play in providing healthy eating practices at home. Also, the lessons show how parents and children can be involved in activities that help them get ready for school. In each of the lessons you will be modeling one or more of the kindergarten readiness skills.

Kindergarten Readiness Skills

- Physical skills — learning to use the body
- Language skills — reading, talking and listening
- Self-control strategies — understanding feelings and making good choices
- Social skills — learning to interact with others
- Eagerness to Learn — using that curiosity to explore the world

Kindergarten Readiness Activities in Family- Centered Education

Each of the family-centered lessons plans includes specific elements that help children get ready for school.

Music The music at the beginning of each session welcomes the families and sets the stage for a fun learning environment. Music has been shown to be a great way to help a child's brain develop.

Introductions/Warm up The warm up activity gives the children and parents a chance to interact with each other. This friendly conversation invites children to get involved just like they will do in school.

Book Sharing Sharing a book in each class helps children explore the exciting world available through books. Plus reading aloud to children is considered one of the most important ways to help children become successful readers themselves. Sharing stories (written and oral) is something parents can do at home.

Hands-on Activities Each lesson offers a fun activity for families to do together. In these activities children will use their bodies, have fun with language and math, and try out their social skills in a group setting.

Take Home Activities Families will share ideas for playful learning they can do at home. As the primary teachers of their children, parents and caregivers will leave the WIC session with new things to try. We want to send the message to all our WIC families that learning at home is very important in helping children get ready for school. For babies, toddlers or preschool aged children, parents play a critical role in helping them learn and grow. Even a family expecting a child can begin to explore their role as a primary teacher. On the next page, look at some of the ways WIC families can help children get ready for school.

Getting Ready for School: Helping Children Learn and Grow

For Babies and Toddlers	For Preschoolers
<i>Physical Skills: Learning to Use the Body</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage baby to touch, reach, grasp, roll ▪ Make safe places for baby to crawl and explore ▪ Provide safe and healthy finger foods for older babies and toddlers ▪ Turn pages in cardboard books ▪ Join in physical play everyday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage your child to run, hop, skip, jump and play games ▪ Visit a neighborhood playground ▪ Gather and sort items ▪ Enjoy puzzles, drawing, cutting, shaping, gluing, coloring
<i>Language Skills: Reading, Talking and Listening</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sing songs ▪ Talk about what you see and do ▪ Repeat simple rhymes or expression ▪ Cuddle up and look at simple books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ask them questions ▪ Encourage them to talk about their ideas ▪ Find fun books at the library to read ▪ Make up silly words and write them down ▪ Tell stories and draw pictures
<i>Self-Control Strategies: Understanding Feelings, Making Good Choices</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hug and hold often ▪ Respond to baby's needs ▪ Give feelings a name ▪ Notice them when they do well ▪ Keep calm and ask for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Listen for feelings and words ▪ Encourage positive behaviors ▪ Provide clear messages ▪ Use simple rules ▪ Offer a choice
<i>Social Skills: Learning to Interact with Others</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respond to their coos and babbles ▪ Play peek-a-boo and other games ▪ Learn about baby's needs and moods ▪ Teach calming and soothing strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage them to use their words ▪ Meet with other children to play ▪ Practice taking turns ▪ Use puppets and dress up clothes for pretend play ▪ Show your child positive interactions with others
<i>Eagerness to Learn: Using that Curiosity to Explore the World</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enjoy playful times together ▪ Explore books everyday ▪ Give them safe places to explore ▪ Let them try all their senses: hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, smelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage their curiosity ▪ Try to answer their questions ▪ Let them know they are "thinkers" ▪ Play and learn together ▪ Proudly display their projects

Parenting Skill Support

In WIC family-centered education the educator is also in the role of supporting parents as they strive to do the best job they can. Although WIC educators are not asked to wear a formal “parent educator” hat, the FCE class integrates many aspects of parenting support.

First, WIC educators have a significant role in engaging parents and children in activities related to nutrition and health. By doing this you are modeling strategies that can be used in real life. For example, if children are involved with counting fruits and vegetables in a playful activity, the parent can decide how to incorporate this type of activity at home. Involving the children in packing a “purse” to take to the grocery store offers parents the chance to see how planning ahead may afford them a less stressful shopping trip. At the store, they will be able to give attention needed to choosing healthy foods for their families.

By emphasizing school readiness in WIC FCE, you can give support to parents as they help their children get ready for school. If parents and children have a pleasant experience sharing stories in their WIC class they are more likely to give it a try at home. If a consistent message is given about how much babies enjoy exploring books, parents may be more willing to offer a book-sharing time to their infant. You can encourage parents in the variety of ways they help their children learn. If you also introduce some new ideas during your time together they will leave the class with a “plateful” of enticing activities to help their children learn and grow.

Finally, the family-centered model also allows WIC educators to give the positive supportive messages that both children and their caregivers need to hear. These positive messages may be . . .

- *Assuring* a mother with a fussy baby that “it is okay,” and offering her a comfortable place to breastfeed her infant.
- *Smiling* with a family who has noticed how pleased their child is with artwork they have created together.
- *Acknowledging* the feelings of an impatient toddler awaiting a turn (“it’s hard to wait sometimes”) or of an anxious caregiver who is feeling stressed.
- *Validating* the creative things families do every day to balance children, jobs, relationships, etc.

- *Noticing* a child who is enthralled with a book being read aloud and asking the parent what are favorite stories at home.
- *Encouraging* an elder family member to share important oral stories that reflect that family's cultural heritage as an essential way to help that child learn and grow.

Benefits of Family - Centered Education

In using the WIC family-centered approach, you are likely to see benefits for parents, children and staff.

Parents will:

- increase knowledge and enhance skills in the area of child and family nutrition,
- have a positive experience of learning with their children, that enhances bonding and relieves them of the worry of watching their children while they attend to an adult lesson, and
- learn from the modeling of the educator how parents can be their children's first teachers and enhance school readiness.

Children will:

- experience family-based nutrition education activities in a positive atmosphere,
- develop skills that will make them more ready for kindergarten, and
- become more interested in nutrition and physical activity.

Staff will:

- learn ways of coping with challenging situations raised by children in classes and
- enhance their repertoire of types of group education.

This is what WIC family-centered education is all about. It is an environment where families can learn and explore together, and build school readiness skills. Parents can get support for that most important job that they do. And you, the WIC educator, can expand the good that you do in your job. To paraphrase the old saying, "we are not just giving the family a fish, we are teaching them to go fishing together!"