

Spotlighting the Role of a WIC Nutritionist

In celebration of National Nutrition Month, USDA shines a spotlight on the role of the WIC program's nutritionists in advancing nutrition security and ensuring those nutrition education efforts meet the needs of the diverse audiences they serve.

Hear from a Nutritionist in the Massachusetts WIC Program



Mom of five Angela Brown has been a nutrition educator since graduating from Hampshire College in 2005 with a bachelor's degree in Food Science. While she's worked for a variety of organizations over her career, her dream was to work for WIC.

"Back in 2006, when I had my first child I was a participant in the Quincy WIC Program," said Brown. "The ladies were phenomenal; they welcomed me and taught me a lot of things as a new parent and as a nutritionist as well—how to speak with clients and connect with them. Ever since I've always wanted to work for WIC. I finally got a chance and have been working in the Brockton WIC Program for 4 years now."

Risk Assessment

In WIC, nutritionists offer nutrition assessment, education, and counseling to participants as part of a team. Being at nutritional risk is one of the key qualifiers of the WIC program. Two major

types of nutritional risk are recognized for WIC eligibility:

- Medically based risks, such as anemia, underweight, maternal age, history of pregnancy complications, or poor pregnancy outcomes.
- Diet-based risks such as inadequate dietary pattern.

Brown explains, "Children considered at risk are either underweight or overweight, based on the CDC Growth Charts. They could be a picky eater or a sometime eater or not eating the textured food for their age. For babies if they are spitting up a lot, nursing or voiding inadequately that can be an indicator they are not getting enough milk, whether it be formula or breastmilk. For pregnant moms, a lot can't keep food down because of nausea so that's a risk for mom and baby."

Using the CDC Milestone Checklist, the Massachusetts WIC team engages parents in monitoring their children's development from age 2 months through 5 years and supports them with referrals when developmental concerns are identified. "So we don't just screen based on food rights—do you have enough to eat at home. Giving mom a guideline on where the child should be physically, emotionally and mentally makes WIC a well-rounded resource for our participants."

"Our WIC nutritionists do an outstanding job supporting participants," said Rachel Colchamiro, Director of the Massachusetts WIC Program. "Like Angela, they develop a great rapport with families, and are enthusiastic about providing high-quality nutrition services. Participants greatly appreciate staff's dedication and commitment, as well as their support and guidance regarding nutrition, breastfeeding,

child development and numerous other initiatives. We are so proud to have Angela as part of our team.”

Building Rapport

Brown excels at relationship building through shared experiences, perspective and respect. “I absolutely love teaching nutrition and interacting with the family on multiple levels. I’ve found when you can make a connection with the child, you are essentially connected with mom and able to develop that rapport.

I feel comfortable in getting to know the person, drawing out the information from them. I’ll sit back a little initially and hear them out. What concerns are happening right now? What support does mom have? Is there family at home that’s helping her? With the pandemic, how are they managing the stress in the household? I find it’s really important to find out these things beforehand. Some of the things that they’re dealing with are greater than the forefront of what’s on the plate. Moms, and I think it’s cross-cultural, have a really hard task with the job of feeding the family. It’s not easy. I have children and I understand what a food budget looks like, how to meal plan and keep the household running.”

Small Steps

After speaking with clients about their day-to-day eating habits, meals, and diet history, Brown creates care plans based on any health concerns with themselves or their children. “I base it on what they are already doing, the foods they are commonly eating and the foods in their culture they really like to eat. For example, if they are eating a lot of white rice, I’ll suggest mixing it with brown rice or adding vegetables. It’s not a one size fits all. I want to be respectful for what they’re already doing, and offer my advice on how we can make it a little healthier. And in some cases, they are already making those healthy choices and I’m supporting them in that.”

Brown sees her job as getting participants to make these small changes. “My job is to find ways that I can meet them halfway at the table. If you are drinking whole milk, I’ll suggest trying a couple weeks of 2% milk and then slowly seeing if they can move over to drinking 1% milk. I’m not going to force that change on a participant at the onset.

I have moms stressed that their children will only eat pizza. I let them know it’s a phase and advise them to continue offering different foods. I remind them of their secret power—we can sneak these things in without them even knowing. Blend up vegetables and add it to the sauce or make pizzas using whole wheat English muffins to add in iron and fiber. When I’m able to reach through and I get those aha moments, I feel like I’ve accomplished a lot and it makes me go home smiling.”

It's Not Just About the Food

Her favorite thing about working for WIC is when a participant asks for her by name because they are happy she helped them with something in the past. And sometimes she is there to be that pillar of support, recalling a call she received from a mother whose baby, born prematurely, was in the NICU. “She was pumping (breastmilk) and going back and forth to Boston,” recalled Brown. “I just tried to make that experience for her as easy as possible, because at that point, we’re not talking about eating kale. We are trying to help her with this stress because if mom is stressed, then baby is stressed. I took a moment and listened. Eventually we worked on how to continue doing what she was already doing, pumping every two to three hours and making sure she kept up her hydration with water. The next time

we spoke her baby was home. It feels so good to help moms and be that listening ear. She was so appreciative that I was able to understand her and hear her out.”

Redefining Your Relationship with Food

Brown's mantra is relate, relate, relate. “I'm not the nutritionist that will teach you to only eat broccoli and whole wheat flour. I tell them as real as it comes, I like cake too. It's okay to acknowledge that you want a sweet treat. I don't look at foods as good and bad foods. First and foremost, I teach my participants that our body needs this fuel. It's just depending on what kind of fuel you decide to put in your body, that's going to sustain whatever energy that you have or need. So I'll tell them to have that slice of cake on occasion, but don't overdo it and put in those healthy foods as well. And it's not something that happens overnight. It's a process to retrain your taste buds for the healthier foods. It takes patience. If you overindulge, recognize what might have been the triggers and move on. Show yourself compassion. For a lot of adults, it's an epiphany.”

Brown takes a celebratory approach to food. In her blog [Kitchen Lifestyles](#) she encourages moms to get their kids in the kitchen, have fun, laugh, try different recipes, begin to develop healthy eating habits and make memories. “Food is something that's with us for life, so why stress over it? Make it an enjoyable experience. It's about developing a new relationship with food. And everybody's different. And every body size is different and shame on us (society) for trying to put us all in one box.”

Brown wanted to share that WIC is a place for people to tap into an abundance of resources for safety, parent support, health, substance use and more. “WIC meets people at all levels, we have a community coordinator and engagement person, we connect with other agencies and services,” said Brown. “Our networks and resources make a person feel supported. WIC is not just food, it's all that and more and I'm happy to be a part of it.”

Brown is president of the Boston Organization of Nutritionist and Dieticians of Color (BOND of Color), a Certified Lactation Counselor® (CLC), fluent in multiple languages and pursuing her master's degree in nutrition education.

Recipes

One of Brown's favorite WIC recipes is called Old MacDonald Had a Muffin. To make it toast a whole wheat English muffin and top it with a slice of Canadian bacon, scrambled egg, sliced tomato, and finish with a slice of cheese. Find more recipes [here](#).

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children - better known as WIC - serves to safeguard the health of low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating including breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health care. WIC serves about half of all infants born in the US. More information about WIC can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/WIC. In Massachusetts, contact the Department of Public Health at <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/women-infants-children-nutrition-program> to find out more about WIC services.

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