

3-4 Understanding Families

Checking your assumptions

Imagine a family. What do you think of when you think of a family? Maybe you picture your own family, or an idealized version of what a family “should” look like. Maybe your mind goes to all sorts of different families you’ve known or have thought about. Here in WIC, we see it all. To get us started on the topic of understanding families, let’s check our assumptions.

Are all WIC participants the same? No, of course they aren’t.

Are all WIC families the same? Again, no they aren’t.

Do all WIC families have the same backgrounds, hardships or concerns? No!



A basic principle in WIC is that we make an effort to accept all WIC participants and families as they are, without judgement. Sometimes this can be difficult because:

1. We don’t understand what makes someone who they are.
2. We have our own set of beliefs, assumptions and biases that influence how we view the world and the people we meet.

It is human nature to make assumptions about ourselves and others based on our own experiences. We assume that everyone thinks like we do. Sometimes those biases are so ingrained we don’t even know we have them. When that happens, we call them **implicit biases**. Our beliefs, assumptions and biases influence how we react to situations and the people we encounter.



Examples:

- If we believe being on time is respectful of others – we may assume that people who are late to appointments are being disrespectful.
- If we believe that mothers are the best caregivers – we may assume that when dads bring their child to WIC appointments it is because the mother is at work and couldn't come to the appointment.

Taking a look at your own beliefs, values, and background may help you be aware of your personal assumptions and biases.

Learning activity

Let's start by taking a look at who you are and what influences your thoughts and actions.



Characteristics	What is yours?	How does it influence the way you see the world?
Language(s) spoken		
Race(s) and ethnicities		
Culture(s) I identify with		

Characteristics	What is yours?	How does it influence the way you see the world?
Gender identity		
Current age – young, middle-aged, older		
Raised in poverty, middle-class, or wealth		
Final decision maker in your family		
Education background		
Religion(s)		
Political viewpoint		
Current health status		
Are you able bodied or living with a disability?		
Family situation		
The 3 most important roles you play		
3 most important values		

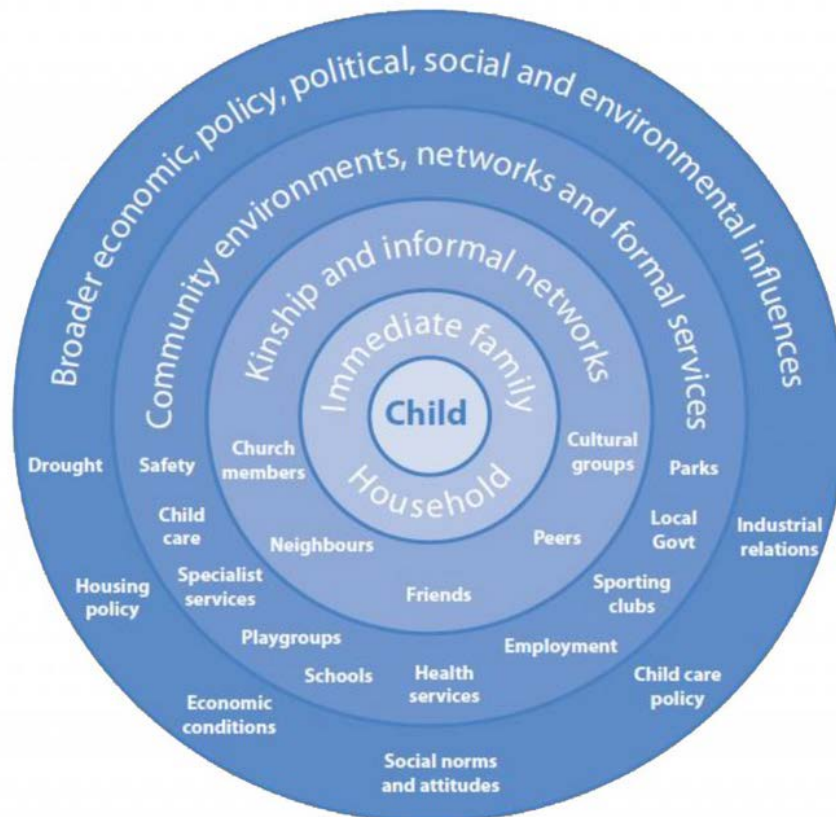
What stands out to you about this activity?

How do you think these characteristics influence the way you approach your work in WIC?

Learning Activity



As you've reflected on the previous section, you may have noticed how many of our beliefs, values, and interactions with each other are influenced by family. In this visual, each of the rings in the circle represents an influence on an individual.



Looking at this chart what do you think has the most direct influence on a child's health?

Where does WIC fit in?

Social determinants of health

Understanding WIC families begins with understanding all the different factors that influence a person's lifelong health and well-being. These factors are called the determinants of health, many of which cannot be controlled by the person. The factors not related to a person's biology or health habits are called social determinants of health. Here is a list of some common social determinants of health.



We define social determinants of health as the conditions in which people are born, live, learn, work, play and age. Social determinants influence a person’s lifelong health and well-being. Social determinants of health are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources throughout local communities, nations, and the world.

Examples:

- If someone doesn’t have a car and lives in a neighborhood where the only store is a convenience store, it is more difficult for them to eat healthy.
- If a caregiver never graduated from high school and works at a low paying job, they may have to choose between buying diapers or buying food. The baby may get changed less frequently resulting in rashes and urinary tract infections.
- If a family lives in a community far from their support system and there are no local community supports, they may suffer from more depression and stress which can impact their health.
- If a family’s health care provider doesn’t speak their language or understand their health beliefs, they may not be able to follow the providers instructions. They may be seen as non-compliant when they don’t do what the provider asks and be treated differently than other patients.

Learning activity



How could the following situations impact someone’s health or well-being?

Social Determinant	Possible health impact
Living in an apartment with no yard and no park nearby	
The lumber mill in town shuts down	
The neighborhood has no sidewalks and the streets are busy	
A migrant family speaks very little English	
A caregiver is on probation and is looking for a job	
A caregiver has a new job and doesn’t have anyone to babysit	
Being a person of color in a predominately white space	

Trauma and resilience informed practices



One common determinant of health is experiencing trauma. After completing the [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) online course you are familiar with how common trauma is and how it impacts lifelong health and well-being. One of the reasons WIC provides participant-centered services to everyone participating in our program is because trauma and ACEs are so common. We could also call providing participant-centered services “trauma and resilience informed practices.”

Just like participant-centered services, trauma and resilience informed practice is an approach, based on knowledge of the impact of trauma, aimed at making sure the clinic environment and WIC services are welcoming and engaging for WIC participants and WIC staff.

The more we understand the principles of trauma and resilience informed practices, the better able we are to support WIC participants and their health and well-being.

Trauma-informed care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in the understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. (Hopper, Bassuck, and Olivet, 2010)

Principles of trauma and resilience informed practices:

Trauma awareness:

- We understand that trauma, adversity, and stress are social determinants of health.
- We understand how common trauma is among WIC participants and staff;
- We recognize the signs of ACEs or trauma in ourselves, participants and their families;
- We understand that some participants may be re-traumatized by experiences in the WIC clinic (e.g. measurements, bloodwork, closed office doors);
- We understand that the history of events in a community may impact current experiences or trauma (e.g. floods, fires, plant closures, history of children being removed from families, discriminatory laws or practices).



Safety:

- We commit to providing physical and emotional safety for WIC participants and staff, and we actively resist re-traumatization;
- We strive to be respectful, trustworthy and transparent in all our dealings (e.g. we let participants know what we are doing, why, and how long it will take);
- If we cannot avoid a potentially traumatizing situation, we try to be transparent about what is happening and why;
- We make our clinic environment feel as safe as possible (e.g. we ask if the participant would like the door open or closed, we let participants choose where to sit, we maintain neat, uncluttered offices).

Choice and empowerment:

- We emphasize choice and empowerment for both participants and staff;
- We understand and respect that it is always the participant’s choice;
- We value collaboration with participants rather than authority.

Strengths-based:

- We focus on strength and resilience, so participants and staff build skills that will help them move in a positive direction;
- We know that building respectful, nurturing relationships with participants can be a protective factor that supports resilience and helps families to flourish.
- We understand the importance of social networks and how they build resilience for participants.

Learning activity

For each situation below, come up with a trauma and resilience informed practice you might use.

Situation	Trauma informed practice
A participant seems anxious and keeps glancing at the door of your office	
A caregiver tells you that her child has been terrified of doctors since they were in the emergency room after an accident	
A WIC participant brings in their friend who has just arrived from a refugee camp	

Different kinds of literacy

Another factor that can influence your interaction with participants is their literacy level. You may think of literacy as the ability to read, but it can be more complicated. There are several different kinds of literacy.



Health literacy

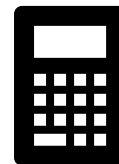
Health literacy is the ability to obtain, read, understand and use healthcare information to make appropriate health decisions and follow instructions for treatment. Here are several things that can impact a participant's health literacy at any given time:



- The communication skills of a professional, like a certifier or health care professional
- Education
- Immigration status
- Limited English Proficiency or LEP (limited ability to speak, read, write or understand English)
- Chronic illness
- Trauma or stress

Numeracy

Numeracy is like literacy except with numbers. It means the ability to understand and work with numbers. Some people may be able to read but still struggle with anything to do with numbers. Some areas of WIC where numeracy makes a difference include:



- Food benefit amounts
- Income guidelines
- Measurements, growth grids, or blood test results

Technology literacy

Because so many of us have computers and Smart Phones, we may assume that everyone can use technology to do what they need to do. This is an incorrect assumption. Technology literacy is sometimes referred to as “problem solving in technology-rich environments.” Which means a person can use technology tools effectively to access and evaluate information, to communicate with others, and perform practical tasks. Like the other types of literacy, there are many things that influence someone's ability to use technology. We should not



assume that based on someone’s age they can or cannot use a type of technology. Some areas in WIC that requires technology literacy includes:

- Accessing online nutrition education
- Setting a PIN for an eWIC card
- Accessing food benefit balance
- Finding accurate information on the internet

What can you do?

Looking at all these factors that affect the health of the families we serve can be overwhelming. Below are some things to consider as you interact with participants.

Be curious:

- Consider how your personal experiences, biases, or barriers influence the way you interact with others;
- Be open to listening and learning from the participant about what their life is like;
- Be humble and willing to learn from and about participants;
- When thinking about a participant’s behavior, ask yourself “what happened to you?”, rather than “what’s wrong with you?”



Don’t assume:

- Don’t assume that you know best or that you know what a participant “should” do;
- Don’t assume that participants can or can’t handle what is happening in their lives.



Focus on strengths:

- Actively seek out and highlight the strengths each person brings to the table;
- Use your participant-centered services skills to help participants get the most out of WIC.



Learning activity

Observe several interactions between WIC staff and participants.

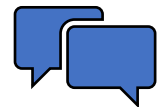


What social determinants of health do you believe might be impacting this participant's life?

How did those factors influence the participant?

How did the WIC staff person show curiosity, avoid assumptions, and focus on strengths?

Talk it over



Discuss your questions with your training supervisor.

What social determinants of health are common concerns in your community?

References



[What is implicit bias?](#) video 2:17 minutes

[Social Determinants of Health – an introduction video](#) 6:27 minutes

[What is Trauma Informed Care?](#) From Trauma Informed Oregon
[Trauma Informed Oregon website](#)

[Health Literacy](#) – From Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)
[Quick Guide to Health Literacy](#) – From US Department of Health and Human Services