



## Fit WIC: Programs to Prevent Childhood Overweight in Your Community: Final Report Summary

**Fit WIC can help the nation’s premier early childhood food and nutrition program work more effectively to reduce and prevent unhealthy weight among our children.**

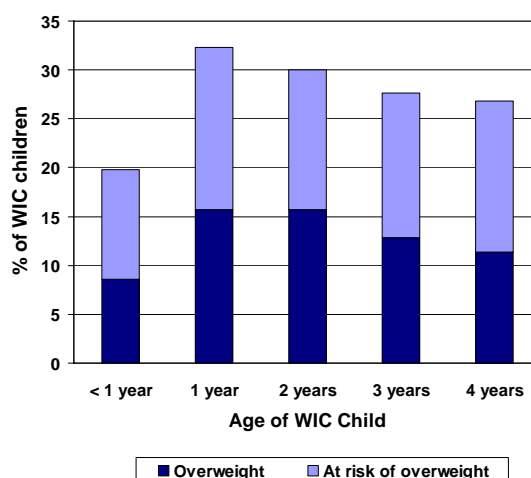
Overweight and obesity are serious health issues in the United States today – and nowhere are the trends of greater concern than among our children. The percentage of young people who are overweight has more than doubled in the last 20 years for children aged six to eleven and almost tripled for adolescents aged 12-19. And we know that overweight among children is the precursor to obesity and its related health problems among adults.

What if a single program could reach the caregivers of one-half of all infants and one quarter of all preschoolers in the U.S., as well as one-third of all expectant mothers, and encourage and support them in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a healthy weight?

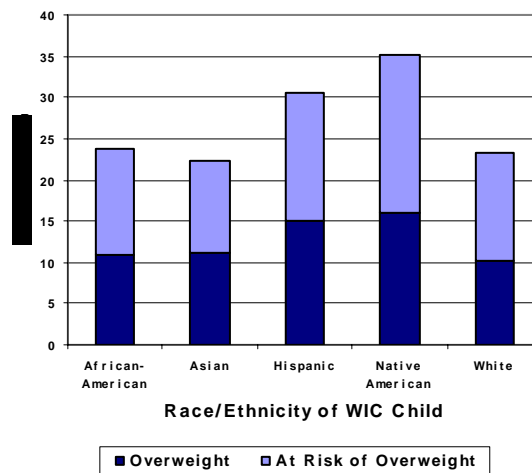
This is the great opportunity, and the great challenge, facing the WIC program. WIC – the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children – provides nutrition information, supplemental foods, and health referrals to almost **eight million** low-income pregnant women, infants and children (up to age five) each month. We know that many of the children in the program are already overweight — 10-16%, depending on age and race/ethnicity—or are at risk of overweight — 11-19%, depending on age or race/ethnicity. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

While addressing childhood overweight is not an easy task, the reach and focus of the WIC program offer a unique opportunity to reduce and prevent this problem

**Figure 1:** Prevalence of overweight risk by age in WIC children in 2000<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 2:** Prevalence of overweight risk by race/ethnicity in WIC children in 2000<sup>1</sup>



among its participants at a time when lifelong dietary habits are being formed.

In 1999, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) launched its WIC Childhood Obesity Prevention Projects to identify and test ways to use the WIC program to better address childhood overweight. Through a competitive process, FNS awarded an initial \$1.8 million in funding for cooperative agreements with WIC Agencies in California, the Intertribal Council of Arizona, Kentucky, Vermont, and Virginia.

These five Agencies developed individual projects while also sharing information and ideas over their three-year term. Dr. Patricia Crawford, co-director of The Center for Weight and Health at the University of California-Berkeley, assisted FNS in coordinating projects across the states. These projects evolved together into "*Fit WIC*," a collection of social-environmental strategies to promote healthy weight among children enrolled in WIC.

During the first year of the projects, each *Fit WIC* project team conducted a variety of assessments in order to develop intervention strategies that would be most effective in preventing childhood overweight. These assessments led to a list of key insights for program development (Figure 3). Based on these insights, the *Fit WIC* teams developed a wide variety of interventions to address prevention of overweight among preschool children:

- Fit WIC California was designed to increase WIC's influence on childhood overweight prevention in the community. The project included many intervention strategies that focused on WIC staff, WIC participants, and the community-at-large. The program was successful in integrating physical activity into the WIC program and improving the health behaviors of WIC staff members. The team received a \$300,000 grant to develop a community garden and they partnered with local restaurants to encourage more fruit and vegetable consumption.
- The Fit WIC program in the Intertribal Council of Arizona approached overweight prevention on many levels. This intervention was designed for WIC staff, WIC caregivers, and WIC children. Fit WIC sites offered children's programs, including physical activities

**Figure 3:** Key insights learned from assessments of WIC participants, WIC staff members and the community at-large:

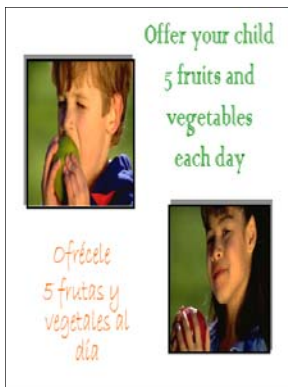
- ✓ Parents did not perceive overweight as a problem for their preschool children
- ✓ Parents were knowledgeable about WIC's health messages, but they struggled with how to put that knowledge into practice
- ✓ Parents lacked information about desirable activity levels for their families
- ✓ WIC families face social and economic barriers to a healthy lifestyle
- ✓ WIC families receive conflicting health messages from health care providers (related to a child's weight)
- ✓ WIC staff had concerns about addressing childhood obesity with their participants
- ✓ Staff expressed a need for additional training on topics related to childhood overweight
- ✓ Staff identified institutional barriers to effective obesity education within WIC, including inadequate resources and the current WIC food package\*\*



\*\*In April 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a report with recommendations for changes to the WIC food package, based on an independent review requested by FNS. The report, entitled "WIC Food Packages: Time for Change," is currently being reviewed by FNS.

and creating healthy snacks, twice per month. By the end of the study period, WIC staff members were more confident in their ability to work with caregivers of WIC children. Staff members also improved their own nutrition and physical activity behaviors during the study.

- The Fit WIC Kentucky team created a video for WIC staff members and health care professionals designed to change perceptions about childhood obesity and help staff members to understand the problem from a client’s perspective. The video, along with a group discussion afterward, led to a greater understanding of barriers and solutions to the childhood overweight epidemic.



- The goal of Fit WIC Vermont was to increase active playtime and decrease sedentary time for three- and four-year-olds. They developed a Fit WIC activity kit, including an instructional booklet for parents, a beach ball, small bean bags, and a cassette tape of children’s play songs. Parents were very happy with the activity kit and reported that their children were still frequently using it several months later.

- Fit WIC Virginia was designed to prevent childhood overweight by improving related parenting skills. They developed six key messages for parents about foods, beverages, physical activity, and television-viewing, then focused on these messages during group classes. WIC staff members were encouraged to serve as positive role models, so the Fit WIC program included regular wellness challenges for them, as well. By the end of the study period, parents who participated in Fit WIC reported offering water (rather than soft drinks) to their children more often and using community centers more often.



## What WIC Can Do Now:

The teams also developed the following recommendations that could help WIC contribute significantly to the nation’s efforts to prevent childhood overweight:

- Increase use of participant-centered assessment and education procedures—take time to learn what participants actually need and then act on those specific needs
- Adopt physical activity as an essential element of nutrition assessment and education—remember that exercise goes hand-in-hand with nutrition for optimal weight and health
- Encourage WIC staff to adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors, as role models for participants

- Change the focus of participant education from weight to healthy lifestyle—remember that overall health is the ultimate goal
- Coordinate and align with nutrition education interventions in other programs through State Nutrition Action Plans.

## More That WIC Can Do:

- Expand and update training for WIC staff—provide training on successful counseling strategies and current nutrition science related to weight and health
- Offer wellness opportunities at work for WIC staff to facilitate healthy eating and exercise
- Establish partnerships with community agencies to develop comprehensive community-wide interventions—(work together to unify and reinforce health messages)
- Increase staffing levels in WIC so that more staff time can be devoted to individual counseling and group education
- Fund additional research to evaluate the impact of obesity prevention initiatives in the WIC setting— increase funding at the national level to support research at the state and local levels
- Continue to explore potential improvements in the WIC food package—(The National Academies' Institute of Medicine has recently provided recommendations for change)

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Data in Figures 1 and 2 are from an internal FNS analysis using participant information collected from State WIC agencies in April 2000 for the report, "WIC Participant and Program Characteristics 2000," WIC-02-PC, by Susan Bartlett, Ramona Olvera, Nicole Gill, and Michelle Laramie. Project Officer, Julie Kresge. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, Alexandria, VA: 2002. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/published/WIC/files/pc2000/pdf> (accessed 3 June 03).

## For More Information:

The full Final Report of *Fit WIC: Programs to Prevent Childhood Overweight in Your Community (1999-2002)* can be found on the USDA FNS website at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/WIC/WIC.htm> . This website also provides access to a current bibliography of research publications that have stemmed from the Fit WIC project.

In addition, *The Implementation Manual for the Fit WIC Childhood Overweight Prevention Project*, along with more detailed information about the specific State Agency interventions can be accessed through the WIC Works website at: [http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Sharing\\_Center/statedev\\_FIT.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Sharing_Center/statedev_FIT.html)

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