

# Continuing Education of Peer Counselors

## Overview

The formal, introductory training period of a WIC breastfeeding peer counselor is the start of a long-term educational process that relies on continuing education and experiential learning.

This final module offers practical strategies for broad-based continuing education opportunities to help peer counselors practice core skills and to expand their base of knowledge, including independent study, shadowing or observing experienced breastfeeding counselors and experts, continuing education at monthly staff meetings, and attendance at breastfeeding workshops and meetings. This module also addresses effective strategies for mentoring peer counselors in the early days of their jobs.

## Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this module, trainees will be able to:

- Identify two ways to help peer counselors continue developing skills and new knowledge.
- Name two ways to appropriately mentor peer counselors in the early days of their jobs.

**Time Allowed:** 1 hour

## Background Information

Successful WIC peer counselor programs provide not only a strong initial training program, but also offer continued learning opportunities for peer counselors to practice core skills. This not only encourages retention of trained peer counselors, but also builds confidence in their knowledge and skills. It also builds program integrity by providing WIC mothers with counselors who are knowledgeable and effective in helping them address their questions and concerns.

## Checklist

- AV Equipment
  - PowerPoint or overhead projector
  - TV/VCR (if using optional video resources)
- Handouts
  - Handout – Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Peer Counselor Log
  - Handout – Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Debriefing
  - Handout – Peer Counselor Graduation Certificate

## Additional Learning Opportunities

- Visit the Website for WIC Works Resource System at [www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks](http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks) to explore available breastfeeding resources that might be useful in providing continuing education at monthly staff meetings with peer counselors.

- Use the WIC Online Learning Modules at [http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/WIC\\_Learning\\_Online/index.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/WIC_Learning_Online/index.html) as an additional resource to provide continuing education to peer counselors. Module topics include basic breastfeeding as well as customer service and other useful information.
- Visit the Website of the National Women’s Health Information Center at [www.4women.gov](http://www.4women.gov) to review breastfeeding information and resources for mothers as well as health professionals and peer counselors. The Website also includes a Breastfeeding Hotline that mothers can call to get help with common breastfeeding issues and to obtain free publications.
- Visit the Website for the International Lactation Consultant Association ([www.ilca.org](http://www.ilca.org)) to view the “Worldwide Education Calendar” of breastfeeding conferences and workshops available around the country. The Website also provides a listing of International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) through the “Find a Lactation Consultant Directory” who might be available for shadowing opportunities.
- Visit the Website for La Leche League, International ([www.lalecheleague.org](http://www.lalecheleague.org)) to review available breastfeeding resources and books for mothers, as well as health professionals, that could be useful in specific continuing education.

# Continuing Education of Peer Counselors

## Trainer Notes

### Slide #1

#### Continuing Education of Peer Counselors

Upon completion of formal training, peer counselors will engage in a continuing educational process. Providing continuing education for peer counselors in a variety of learning opportunities helps build confidence and practical skills for supporting new mothers.

### Slide #2

#### Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this module, trainees will be able to:

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- Name two ways to appropriately mentor peer counselors in the early days of their jobs.

### Slide #3

#### Independent Learning

Independent study opportunities should be used to reinforce the information taught in the peer counselor's initial training program. This helps a peer counselor take full ownership of the information she has learned and builds her confidence. WIC Program supervisors or peer counselor coordinators can provide additional resources to assist peer counselors with independent and facilitated continuing education. They may also be used as a reference for addressing particular issues that may arise when counseling mothers.

#### [Key Talking Points]

- Peer counselors benefit from having access to easy-to-use breastfeeding resources that can reinforce their learning and serve as a referral guide.
- The following resources are often a part of existing WIC breastfeeding literature libraries:
  - WIC Program/agency materials provided to WIC mothers, including pamphlets, videos, and other resources.
  - The WIC Works Resource System, which provides free downloads of breastfeeding educational materials for peer counselors.
  - *Breastfeeding: A Parent's Guide* by Amy Spangler is simple and easy to read and provides basic concepts in breastfeeding technique and management. The book is available in English and Spanish.

- La Leche League's *Breastfeeding Pure and Simple*, *Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, and *Breastfeeding Answer Book*.
- *Why Should I Nurse My Baby* by Pam Wiggins. Available at: <http://www.breastfeedingbooks.com/why.html>.
- *The Breastfeeding Triage Tool*, available from Seattle and King County Public Health. Available at: <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/breastfeeding/factsheets.html>
- Appropriate for more advanced peer counselor study is Thomas Hale's *Medications and Mother's Milk*.
- The *Breastfeeding Answer Book* is appropriate as a reference guide to deal with specific issues but not as a text for peer counselors.
- Ways to assess independent study and justify associated expenditures include:
  - Have peer counselors write short summaries of the material covered.
  - Have the WIC supervisor discuss the studied materials with the peer counselor as part of their routine update meetings.
  - Provide peer counselors with open book worksheets that they can complete as they study.

#### Slide #4

#### **Provide Shadowing Opportunities**

Providing peer counselors with regular and multiple opportunities to observe experienced breastfeeding counselors helps build their confidence and skills set by providing real life learning situations.

#### [Key Talking Points]

- Peer counselors report that shadowing opportunities are important confidence builders and help them become more effective counselors.
- The experts that peer counselors and WIC staff believe are most useful are:
  - Experienced WIC peer counselors.
  - WIC breastfeeding coordinators or other staff who are knowledgeable about breastfeeding.
  - International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs), Certified Lactation Counselors (CLCs) or Certified Lactation Educators (CLEs) on the WIC staff or in the community.
- A variety of shadowing settings and staff are useful for enhancing learning.
- Provide at least five or six shadowing opportunities for trainees to include:

- At least three observations of an experienced peer counselor conducting telephone calls with pregnant and postpartum breastfeeding mothers.
- At least two observations of a breastfeeding expert in the clinic, hospital, or home visit assisting a mother with positioning and latching her infant.
- At least two observations of a WIC certified professional counseling a mother about breastfeeding and/or her general nutrition status.
- At least one visit with a public health nurse, nutritionist, or breastfeeding expert making a home visit with a new mother.

**Slide #5**

**Observational Learning**

Scheduling observational learning experiences should be handled by the WIC peer counselor supervisor or training leader. These sessions should be placed within the framework of the trainees’ overall training process in order to effectively match shadowing experiences with the formal training content.

*Handout – Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Peer Counselor Log*  
*Handout – Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Debriefing*

[Key Talking Points]

- The person being shadowed should introduce the peer counselor to the mother as a breastfeeding mother who is learning more about helping other mothers with breastfeeding.
- The peer counselor should not participate in the counseling session but should, instead, quietly take notes while using her *Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Peer Counselor Log*.
- After the observation is completed, the supervisor should hold a debriefing with the peer counselor to discuss the comments recorded in the log, review her understanding of the session she observed, and assess whether additional observations in the respective content area are warranted
- Supervisors should use the handout, *Shadowing Breastfeeding Experts: Peer Counselor Debriefing*, or develop their own open-ended questions to determine the peer counselor’s perceptions of the observational experience.

**Slide #6**

**Graduation**

WIC peer counseling programs commonly host a graduation “event” at the conclusion of the peer counselor’s training to affirm and recognize the peer counselor’s accomplishments and provide a confident start to her new job.

[Key Talking Points]

- Graduation programs are considered by WIC Programs to be an effective way to:
  - Recognize the accomplishments of peer counselors in a public way.
  - Help peer counselors build a sense of pride and enthusiasm in beginning their jobs.
  - Communicate a sense of importance to peer counselors, their families, local WIC staff, and the community.
  - Allow peer counselors to interface with the WIC staff and other referral sources with whom she will be working closely.
  - Help family members and the community learn more about how they can support the peer counselor.

**Slide #7**

**Planning the Peer Counselor Graduation Event**

Most WIC Programs find that making the graduation a time of celebration helps build a sense of excitement and pride.

*Handout* – Peer Counselor Graduation Certificate

[Key Talking Points]

- Graduations can be held once training is completed or scheduled every few months or even annually to recognize larger numbers of peer counselors who are hired and trained.
- Make graduation programs a celebration by including:
  - A lunch or dinner before the ceremony to foster networking.
  - Festive decorations to make the occasion special.
  - Certificates of achievement suitable for framing.
  - Small gifts for graduates such as a breastfeeding lapel pin that the peer counselors can wear when counseling mothers.
- Invite local dignitaries to speak. Options for speakers might include:
  - WIC local agency director or nutritionist.
  - Media figure in the community.
  - Local physician supportive of breastfeeding.
  - Other respected individuals.
- Those invited might include:
  - Peer counselors and their families.
  - Experienced peer counselors.
  - Local WIC clinic staff.
  - Community leaders.
- Send a press release to the local newspaper.

**Slide #8****The Graduation Program**

The peer counselor graduation program can be a moving experience for peer counselors, their families, and guests. The ceremony can underscore how peer counselors make a difference for WIC families.

## [Key Talking Points]

- Recognize each peer counselor individually while identifying specific skills to praise.
- Allow peer counselors to speak, if they so desire.
- Have experienced peer counselors share how the job has made a difference for WIC mothers.
- Ask WIC mothers to attend and share how peer counselors have supported their breastfeeding experiences.

**Slide #9****Continuing Education after Graduation**

Continuing education is important to maintaining peer counselors' motivation, helping them feel connected to the WIC Program, and providing up-to-date information.

**Slide #10****Monthly Peer Counselor Staff Meetings**

Monthly staff meetings for WIC peer counseling staff are a helpful means for retaining peer counselors and stimulating job satisfaction.

## [Key Talking Points]

- Peer counselors place a high value on monthly staff meetings as a time to:
  - Network with other peer counselors.
  - Learn from more experienced staff.
  - Share common concerns they face in their jobs.
  - Brainstorm solutions for helping mothers overcome barriers to breastfeeding.
  - Hear program updates.
  - Learn new techniques for managing breastfeeding.
  - Continue building a relationship with supervisors and other WIC staff.

**Slide #11****Monthly Meeting Logistics**

For maximum effectiveness, meetings should include a combination of breastfeeding continuing education topics and opportunities for social interaction.

[Key Talking Points]

- Consider meeting in a location where peer counselors can be comfortable bringing their small children, such as a recreation center, library, or other central location.
- Allow time and opportunity for peer counselors to build and nurture relationships with one another.
- Include potluck meals or meet in informal locations such as community parks.
- Provide a short (30 minute) educational session during each staff meeting that deals with breastfeeding topics such as:
  - Respecting cultural differences of WIC mothers.
  - How to use WIC available breast pumps.
  - Understanding appropriate referral sources within the WIC community.
  - Strategies for working at home.
  - Ways to help WIC mothers deal with embarrassment in specific community settings.
  - How to successfully breastfeed multiples.
  - Supporting mothers of premature babies.
- Use monthly staff meetings to show breastfeeding videos.
- Video options include:
  - USDA’s *Fathers and Breastfeeding* video and discussion guide.
  - The “Breastfeeding Techniques that Work” video series by Kittie Frantz.
  - Jane Morton’s “A Premie Needs His Mother.”
- During monthly staff meetings, WIC peer counselor supervisors should review the peer counselors’ contact logs.

**Slide #12**

**WIC Staff Meetings**

Peer counselors value being included in regular WIC staff meetings. This bolsters their sense of membership on the WIC team, assures they are up-to-date with program policies and information, and provides opportunities to interact with staff they may not see regularly.

[Key Talking Points]

- Participation in staff meetings improves peer counselors’ core understanding of the WIC Program.
- Staff meetings allow peer counselors to stay informed of WIC agency priorities, policies, and program updates.
- Participation in WIC staff meetings helps improve the referral network between peer counselors and other WIC staff.

### Slide #13

#### **Breastfeeding Conferences and Workshops**

Breastfeeding science and practices change as new knowledge is discovered. Continuing education through breastfeeding information updates helps peer counselors to stay current in their approaches to supporting mothers.

#### [Key Talking Points]

- Useful breastfeeding conference and meeting opportunities that are commonly offered to peer counselors by successful WIC programs include:
  - State or local breastfeeding conferences sponsored by WIC.
  - Local breastfeeding coalitions.
  - Continuing education provided by local hospitals.
  - La Leche League area group meetings.
  - WIC in-service training sessions.
- Allowing peer counselors to learn “cutting edge” breastfeeding information from recognized experts is empowering and contributes to job satisfaction for peer counselors.
- Attending breastfeeding educational events is motivational and energizing for peer counselors.
- After breastfeeding educational conferences or events, it is valuable to conduct debriefings with peer counselors to discuss what they learned and how that information might be incorporated into their counseling.
- Learn about breastfeeding educational events scheduled in your area through:
  - Regional USDA/FNS offices.
  - State WIC offices.
  - Local WIC agencies.
  - National WIC Association Website.
  - International Lactation Consultant Association’s “Worldwide Education Calendar” at [www.ilca.org](http://www.ilca.org).
  - Local La Leche League contacts.

### Slide #14

#### **Staging the Caseload**

Stage the caseload of a new peer counselor so she is introduced to manageable cases early in her tenure as a peer counselor. This helps her grow in confidence and builds her skills before tackling more challenging breastfeeding situations.

#### [Key Talking Points]

- During the first few weeks, assign peer counselors to a limited number of pregnant women who are not expected to deliver soon and who do not present special case situations so counselors can do the following:

- Practice building relationships with WIC mothers.
- Improve counseling skills with more manageable mothers.
- Make necessary adjustments to beginning a new job.
- After demonstrating success with less challenging cases, increase the caseload to include mothers who have been breastfeeding for a while and are past the early postpartum period of breastfeeding.
- The final caseload additions should include mothers who are in the early days of breastfeeding or who are due to deliver soon.

**Slide #15**

**Mentoring Peer Counselors**

Like the sense of empowerment and confidence that peer counselors help foster in mothers, peer counselors rely on sensitive, ongoing support from their supervisors.

[Key Talking Points]

- Peer counselors are like the mothers they help.
- They may have many of the same life stresses.
- Their job experiences may be limited.
- Peer counselors with supervisors who function as mentors and role models during the first six months of their employment become more effective peer counselors.
- WIC professional staff members serve multiple roles with trainees/peer counselors. They provide support, nurturance, affection, and guidance. They also provide instruction, monitor job performance, administer WIC policy, and at times, handle disciplinary actions.
- Mentoring is not necessarily the same as building a friendship.
- One of the keys to successful mentoring is maintaining a healthy understanding of the role differentiation between a supervisor/mentor and the trainees/peer counselors. This fosters improved performance and a sense of security among supervisor/mentors and peer counselors.
- Mentoring involves:
  - Anticipatory guidance to peer counselors with adjustment to new circumstances.
  - Regular affirmation of the peer counselors' progress and success.
  - Clear information regarding the roles and tasks associated with successful peer counseling.
  - Counseling/listening to non-work related issues.
  - Establishing appropriate and clear boundary guidelines.

[Instructional Guidance]

- Facilitate a discussion to encourage trainees to discuss their desire for support from more experienced staff/supervisors. Focus on managing new experiences rather than learning new information.
- Discussion triggers include:
  - The experiences trainees have had in new situations or learning something new.
  - Their experiences/feelings in those situations.
  - The trainer should share personal experiences.
- Discuss ways that people were helped to feel at ease in these situations.
  - Who helped?
  - How did they help?
  - What was the result?

**Slide #16**

**Effective Strategies for Mentoring Peer Counselors**

Prompt and timely follow-up using *3-Step Counseling Strategy*© principles is an excellent way to affirm and equip peer counselors during the mentoring process.

[Key Talking Points]

- Talk with peer counselors about stress management strategies as they begin to incorporate their jobs into their home lives.
- Make contact, at least weekly, with new peer counselors.
- Use open-ended questions to:
  - Assess comfort levels with the new job.
  - Discuss peer counselors' experiences (positive and concerns).
- Assess additional guidance or training needs.
- Conduct observations of phone and in-clinic counseling sessions to provide additional feedback.
- Immediately follow-up on phone or e-mail referrals and questions by the peer counselor.
- Establish a system for providing support when problems arise with which the new peer counselor needs assistance.

*Discussion:*

- What are some open-ended questions that supervisors or peer counselor coordinators could discuss with a new peer counselor in a weekly phone call or in-person visit?
- Some examples include:
  - What have you enjoyed about your job this past week?
  - What has been hard for you?
  - Tell me about a mother you felt good about helping this week.

- Tell about a mother who had challenges that made you feel uneasy. How did you handle it?
- What is your family telling you about the job?
- What are some things you feel you would like to learn more about?
- What are some things we could help you with?

**Slide #17**

**The Power of Praise**

Peer counselors thrive in an environment where they are regularly affirmed.

[Key Talking Points]

- For many peer counselors, this job is their employment.
- Recognition before peers is a powerful incentive for peer counselors.
- Ongoing affirmation is critical to building confidence.
- Affirm the positive impact peer counselors have on WIC mothers.
- Modeling affirmation with peer counselors helps them assimilate a positive counseling style they can use with WIC mothers.
- Report to peer counselors when mothers provide positive comments on the impact they have on them.
- Ask peer counselors to share thank-you notes from WIC mothers during monthly staff meeting.

*Discussion:*

- What are some affirming statements that could be used with peer counselors as they learn to do their jobs?  
Examples include:
  - I like the way you told the mother how proud you were of her.
  - Other peer counselors have told me that, too.
  - It sounds as though you are really excited about your job.
  - I can see already what a difference your work is making.
  - Our WIC mothers are very fortunate to have you as their counselor.

**Slide #18**

**You Can Train Peer Counselors Effectively**

As a WIC designated peer counselor trainer, you have all of the skills and tools needed to effectively train peer counselors in the WIC Program.

[Key Talking Points]

- Remember that you are the expert! As WIC's designated trainer, you possess basic knowledge of breastfeeding and WIC to share with peer counselors.
- You have the tools you need to train peer counselors, including:
  - The “*Loving Support*© through Peer Counseling” curriculum, with speaker notes and visual aids needed to effectively train peer counselors.
  - Your own stories and personal experiences that can be shared with peer counselors to personalize the training.
  - Resources available on the Web and within your local community.
- Peer counselors value your help. They want to learn from your experience and find out how to help breastfeeding mothers.

**Slide #19**

**Final Thought**

*“I really enjoy our breastfeeding updates, because you get to hear what is happening in other counties and what other peer counselors are doing. If you have issues, you get to verbalize them among people who are actually dealing with the same kind of thing, and together you can brainstorm solutions.”*

WIC Peer Counselor