

Choosing to Breastfeed

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Pregnancy & early parenthood

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Screening & assessment
- Advocacy

It is an exciting time for a mother to begin to prepare for the arrival of her beautiful baby (or two!) Knowing that there are a variety of situations, it is pertinent for a home visitor to be mindful in understanding that every mother is coming from a different experience and background during their pregnancy. As it is understood throughout the Early Child Education and Care Department Home Visiting programs, as home visitors it is important to meet the family where they are so that the best and most suitable support is provided to ensure the health and safety of the baby and their family.

According to Breastfeeding Medicine, research has verified that early conversations about breastfeeding and the continuum of care after a mother gives birth, impacts the success of breastfeeding as well as other maternal and infant lifetime benefits (Holmes, McLeod and Bunik, 2013). In beginning to discuss breastfeeding with an expectant mother, there are steps that can be taken to ensure that the mother has a comprehensive understanding of breastfeeding and can also advocate for herself about the subject. After a mother delivers her baby, one of the first choices she will make is if she will be breastfeeding or bottle feeding. This choice should be an informed decision based on thorough preparation throughout the pregnancy.

In the state of New Mexico, as part of the Healthy Births outcome in the NM Home Visiting Annual Outcomes Report for FY20, 89.5% of mothers initiated breastfeeding, above the state average of 88.8% (UNM). These statistics show that the home visiting programs are quite successful in having conversations with mothers before they give birth. As a home visitor, how could these discussions look and what preparations can be made to help this process be the most comfortable as well as successful?

Depending on the situation of the mother, a home visitor may be her only support during this transitional time of expanding her family. Home visitors are encouraged to not only be a support, but it is an expectation for them to help the families they serve to become their own advocates as well. Becoming and understanding how to advocate for oneself

helps that parent be successful in whatever challenges may arise for their family. While being a support to families, home visitors can also bridge the gap between other providers and the family. It is important to also understand that no matter what decision is made by the mother, home visitors support and help her understand she is a good mother and know that she ultimately wants what is best for her baby.

To begin to prepare a mother for breastfeeding she can be encouraged to make a list of questions that she may have regarding this topic. Some of these may include: What are the benefits of breastfeeding? If I choose to breastfeed, does the food I eat affect the baby? How often will I need to feed my baby? How do I know if my baby is full or not? What do I do if my baby is having a hard time with breastfeeding? As we can see, these are just a few of the many questions that may arise. The most valuable thing is the initiation of the conversation with the mother and then what is provided by the home visitor moving forward. One of the most important steps a mother can take is to receive prenatal education, as this will be one of the best things she can do in order to make an informed decision to choose breastfeeding or not.

An example of what this can look like is a mother talking to her OB-GYN about breastfeeding education resources. These can include finding and enrolling in a breastfeeding class, understanding who her supports are and having open conversations about her understanding of breastfeeding with these supports, understanding that breastfeeding is a process, and knowing she ultimately wants what is best for her baby. The saying goes that knowledge is power; the more knowledgeable a mother is regarding the benefits of breastfeeding, the more informed her decision will be about breastfeeding when her baby arrives.

I had the pleasure of interviewing an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant, and was enlightened and intrigued by all the information she shared. Within the conversation, one highlight was the best thing a mother can do in making an informed decision about whether or not she will breastfeed is to educate herself, whatever that looks like. The more a mother knows about the benefits of breastfeeding, and what her supports are as a new mother, even after the baby is born, the more successful she will be in making the best decisions for her and her baby.

Another highlight during the conversation was that even with all the rich information and research surrounding breastfeeding and its benefits, researchers are just on the cusp of discovering the lifelong benefits. There is so much more to be learned regarding how important breastfeeding is for a mother and her baby.

So what are the benefits of breastfeeding and why do experts recommend exclusive breastfeeding? According to the International Lactation Consultant Association, breast milk is perfectly designed to be your baby's only food. Breast milk contains the nutrients infants need to grow, as well as antibodies and other immune factors that help your baby stay healthy. Breast milk also coats the inside of your baby's gut to prevent bacteria and viruses from getting into the baby's body. So babies who are *exclusively* breastfed stay healthier than babies who are given both formula and breast milk.

Mothers who breastfeed exclusively are likely to breastfeed longer. Many of the benefits of breastfeeding are seen when mothers breastfeed for at least 3 months. For mothers, exclusive breastfeeding during the first 6 months means that more calories are going into making milk (so the mother loses weight more quickly, which is important for her health). Also, mothers who exclusively breastfeed often go 9 months without a period after their babies are born. Longer breastfeeding is also related to greater protection for mothers against breast cancer (Heinig and Ishii, 2004).

Another benefit includes the constant “communication” between the mom and baby during breastfeeding. The mother’s milk innately changes to meet the needs of the baby at any time. In other words, the milk is a “custom-made” shake for the baby. How amazing that a mother’s body is to be able to adjust to the needs of her baby!

Furthermore, only breast milk contains more than 190 different fatty acids, and immune factors that work together to boost your baby’s immune system and help your baby stay healthy. It also contains enzymes that help your baby digest your milk, growth factors and hormones that help your baby develop and grow strong, and specific antibodies against germs that you’ve been exposed to, so your baby is protected from them (Heinig and Ishii, 2004). There are countless ingredients in breast milk according to current research that do more than we can comprehend, but will be a lifelong benefit for babies.

Ultimately, it is up to the mother to decide what she feels is best for her and her baby’s health. As a home visitor, it is imperative that this conversation begins to happen early on with pregnant mothers and for the home visitor to also have a great understanding that while they are not necessarily the expert, they play a vital role in bridging that gap of understanding between the mother and the providers.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- As a home visitor, what have your conversations looked like in regards to informing a mother about breastfeeding?
- When do you as a home visitor begin to have a conversation about breastfeeding with an expectant mother?
- How are you as a home visitor able to bridge the gap between providers and mothers regarding breastfeeding resources?

References/Additional Resources

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