

Educating Mothers

Definition

The goal of educating mothers is not only to increase their breastfeeding knowledge and skills, but also to influence their attitudes toward breastfeeding. Breastfeeding education occurs most often during the prenatal and **intrapartum** periods and should be taught by someone with expertise or training in lactation management. This instruction typically occurs within an informally structured small group setting but may be given one-to-one. This education primarily includes information and resources. Although the target audience is usually pregnant or breastfeeding women, it may include fathers and others who support the breastfeeding mother.



Rationale

In the United States, most new mothers do not have direct, personal knowledge of breastfeeding, and many find it hard to rely on family members for consistent, accurate information and guidance about infant feeding. Further, although many women have a general understanding of the benefits of breastfeeding, they lack exposure to sources of information regarding how breastfeeding is actually carried out.⁴⁵

Evidence of Effectiveness

A review by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force in July 2003⁴⁶ determined education on breastfeeding to be the most effective single intervention for increasing breastfeeding initiation and short-term duration. This review included 30 controlled trials and 5 systematic reviews. A 2001 **Cochrane review**⁴¹ searched 20 controlled trials and found that prenatal education in small groups is effective in increasing breastfeeding initiation rates.

Description and Characteristics

Prenatal Education

Breastfeeding education during pregnancy is often offered in a hospital or clinic group setting, but it need not be provided in a medical setting. Libraries, community centers, YMCA-type facilities, churches, temples, schools, and work sites can all be appropriate venues. Classes are typically





offered by a professional trained in breastfeeding or lactation management who is an effective teacher with groups of adults.

Classes may meet as part of a series (such as infant care or childbirth) or be freestanding. In addition to traditional instruction, classes often incorporate multidimensional learning opportunities, such as demonstrations and practice using a doll, videos, observing a newborn breastfeeding, and work in small groups. Many hospital-based classes include instruction on preparing for the infant's birth and early feeding practices that is directly tied to the policies at that particular hospital.

Prenatal curricula most often provide guidance for mothers about anticipated situations and signs of effective breastfeeding or breastfeeding problems; the benefits of breastfeeding to mother, baby, and society; appropriate positioning for feeding; facilitating effective **latch**; specific needs in the early days of breastfeeding; and resources for assistance. Emphasis is generally placed on building skills for latch and positioning, as well as addressing common fears, concerns, problems, and myths.

Intrapartum Education

Education on breastfeeding during the intrapartum period is extremely time sensitive. This type of education is often less formal than education provided during pregnancy and is generally conducted individually. Intrapartum breastfeeding education almost always occurs within a hospital setting.



Photo by Kimberly Cavaliero, courtesy of La Leche League International

Intrapartum breastfeeding education most often focuses on immediate issues such as fostering appropriate latch and positioning, adequate milk removal, stability of the infant, and comfort of the mother. It also gives an opportunity to reassure and support a concerned mother or family member, provides mothers and family members with referral information for further **postpartum** support, and allows the reiteration of signs of success or potential problems in the first few days after hospital discharge. All hospitals that routinely handle births should have staff with adequate training and knowledge to address and facilitate routine, standard breastfeeding education in the intrapartum period for all **breastfeeding dyads**.

All members of the health care team working with mothers and infants should possess basic skills in breastfeeding management and facilitate breastfeeding among their patient population. The standard professional member of the health care team for complex breastfeeding problems and lactation management is the IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant). Other health professionals with expertise in lactation management include physicians and nurses who specialize in lactation.

Program Examples

Evergreen Hospital Medical Center is a *Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative* (BFHI) hospital in Kirkland, Washington, and offers patients infant feeding classes that the hospital describes as follows:

You will learn the basics of infant feeding with the primary focus on breastfeeding as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (**AAP**). Includes an overview of the AAP guidelines, indications for alternate feeding methods, and the three feeding phases during the first year of life. A parent panel shares its breastfeeding experiences and valuable insights.



Health insurance plans can provide breastfeeding education for their members. Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare (Massachusetts) offers a lactation support program to its members. As part of this program, enrollees who are pregnant can take a prenatal breastfeeding class at no charge.

The Texas Department of Health provides a variety of training programs for persons who will provide breastfeeding education to mothers. The classes are offered throughout the year in Texas and are also available by request nationwide. All training classes provide continuing education credit.

Bright Future* Lactation Education Resource Centre, Ltd. (Dayton, Ohio) offers guidance and training for those developing and conducting education on breastfeeding for mothers. Training and written resources are available to assist instructors in developing and sustaining evidence-based education on breastfeeding.

* Note: This organization is distinct from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Bright Futures.

Potential Action Steps

- Fund training programs for health educators from local health departments who work with women of childbearing age to educate mothers about breastfeeding.
- Encourage health professional organizations to provide training for their members who provide services to women of childbearing age in providing breastfeeding education to mothers.

Resources

Evergreen Hospital Medical Center:
<http://www.evergreenhealthcare.org/showpage.asp?sec=28>

La Leche League International:
<http://www.lalecheleague.org>

Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare:
http://www.harvardpilgrim.org/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/MEMBERS/WELLNESS/MANAGE/CLASSES/2004_FALL_HEALTH_CLASSES.PDF

Bright Future Lactation Resource Centre, Ltd.:
<http://www.bflrc.info>

- Incorporate maternal breastfeeding education into Early Intervention (federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – **IDEA**) and women’s programs, including Early Head Start, Success by Six, Infant and Toddler Programs (Part C of IDEA), family planning, teen pregnancy, and women’s health clinic programs.
- Encourage childbirth educators to routinely incorporate evidence-based education on breastfeeding as an integrated component of their curricula.
- Encourage health plans to routinely offer prenatal classes on breastfeeding to all their members.