

Breastfeeding research in South Gloucestershire: Summary Mothers' Early Experiences of Infant Feeding

How did this research come about?

Breastfeeding is the optimal way to feed babies although it is recognised that it can be difficult to establish and maintain. We wanted to find out how mothers felt about their early experiences of feeding their baby, particularly of any support they received with breastfeeding. We wanted to use this feedback to help improve the services offered to mothers.

How did we carry out the research?

We interviewed 24 mothers. They were all volunteers, contacted through 'Baby and Me' courses, run at six Children's Centres. Their babies were between 11 weeks and 7½ months old. All the mothers had breastfed, although for some, only for a very short time. At the time of the interview, 11 women were fully breastfeeding, 5 were partially breastfeeding and 8 were no longer breastfeeding. All the mothers had read an information sheet and signed a consent form before the interview.

We asked mothers about their experiences of breastfeeding and particularly the support that they had received in the early weeks. The interviews were recorded and analysed so that we could look at the themes covered by mothers when they talked about their experiences and support received.

What did we find?

The findings suggest that there are three 'critical stages' when supporting a mother to breastfeed, and which influence her experience of breastfeeding in the early weeks of her baby's life.

- **Support before the birth:**
 - relating to preparation for breastfeeding
 - intention to breastfeed
- **Support around the time of the birth:**
 - relating to the influence of birth experience on subsequent feeding experience
 - from health professionals
- **Support once at home:**
 - from health professionals
 - from breastfeeding support groups
 - from family, friends and other networks
 - from helplines and national charities
 - from websites and social media

What have we learnt?

The findings need to be put in context. Services and practitioners supporting breastfeeding mothers need to be viewed against the background of cultural norms and social practices that also influence breastfeeding in South Gloucestershire.

Some mothers feel that before the birth they had an unrealistic idea of what breastfeeding might be like. Some women would like more information about infant feeding to be available for pregnant women, although not all the mothers we interviewed would have welcomed this.

*It was slightly overwhelming in terms of, oh my gosh, there's so many different things that I didn't think I needed to know. Like, **I didn't realise quite how complicated it can be** [...]. [Emma, fully breastfeeding]*

They said it was up to you if you wanted to bottle or breastfeed but it was made clear that breastfeeding was probably the best thing to do. Yeah, I wanted to try that. [Yvonne, formula only]

We found that many of the mothers had experienced challenges in breastfeeding around the time of the birth. Not all women felt that they got the help they needed at this time.

***The baby's learning and you're learning and you feel really helpless** because they are crying, because they're hungry and you can't, you're sore and they can't get the latch. [Ella, partially breastfeeding]*

***The hospital staff should have, they should be singing from the same hymn sheet really** [...] I felt like you do what one person was saying and then someone else would come along and contradict it. [Amy, formula only + solid food]*

When mothers come home with their new babies, several forms of support for breastfeeding are available. However, some of the women we interviewed found it hard to access this support. All had contact with midwives and health visitors, but the extent of this varied. Breastfeeding support groups were viewed as helpful by some mothers; however some did not wish to attend a group or found they needed support between meetings. Other important sources of support included family, friends, and use of the internet and social media.

*They don't mention enough how you can personally feel if you don't pick it up [...] **a lot of people that do breastfeed in the first couple of weeks do find it really hard and there's not enough on that.** [Ella, partially breastfeeding]*

***It's gone very well for him! But it takes its toll on me** which was why I was there, to sort of get some support I guess. [Clare, fully breastfeeding]*

*...**offer to come back again**, unless you are adamant that you don't want the help maybe turn around and say, actually I am in the area tomorrow, do you want me to pop in again? Rather than me feeling like I am continually pestering them. [Grace, formula only]*

Are there limitations to the research?

We were able to interview 24 women. We cannot be sure if the research findings are true for all women in South Gloucestershire and we didn't have time to explore all of the issues raised.

What will we do now?

We have written a report for South Gloucestershire Council so they can hear the opinions of the mothers we interviewed. We have made recommendations about improving local support for infant feeding and will be working with services and practitioners to make some changes.

Thank you!

We are very grateful to all the mothers and babies who took part in the project. Without their help, the research would not have been possible. We are also grateful for the South Gloucestershire Children's Centres for helping us interview the mothers.

January 2017

For more information please contact:

Nicola Ellis, Specialist Health Improvement Practitioner

Public Health and Wellbeing Division, South Gloucestershire Council

nicola.ellis@southglos.gov.uk