

Backing needed for breastfeeding

A healthy start in life is crucial for health in later life. Increasing breastfeeding rates is a common local target designed to help achieve that. Catherine Heffernan says that better support is needed to make this a reality.

I was flicking through a mother and baby magazine when I happened upon an article about Breast Buddies. This is a new government initiative to send trained breast feeding counsellors into low socio-economic areas. The aim is to help increase uptake of breastfeeding in the UK. (Latest data from the Office of National Statistics showed that only 35% of babies are exclusively breastfed at one week after birth).

The author asserted that Breast Buddies was really an excuse for middle class women to impose their views on the lower socio-economic groups. I was appalled. This attitude that breastfeeding is elitist and can only be enjoyed by a small number of women who can afford the time to feed on demand ignores the crux of the problem. Upon hospital discharge 70% of women breastfeed yet one month later, this drops to 49%. Why do women who want to breastfeed give up? They simply find it too difficult to establish it on their own. All women, especially first time mothers need support in those crucial first six weeks.


The first two weeks are tough. Engorged breasts, cracked or bleeding nipples and toe-curling pain when the baby latches on, are common experiences. Women are generally not told about these and more importantly, that they do not last. Women look at the books, DVDs and other literature but generally these are about promoting breastfeeding rather than troubleshooting. When their experiences do not match up, they can feel inadequate. Lack of confidence in producing enough breast milk for their baby is a much-cited reason for giving up breastfeeding.

Coupled with this is the fact that many first time mothers make the mistake of feeding every time the baby cries and end up feeling that they spend their lives sitting under their baby. This leads them to being frustrated about not being able to get on with their chores and they can end up depressed and exhausted.

The key to continuing breastfeeding is support. By this, I don't mean the list of breastfeeding support groups handed out by midwives to new mothers. Indeed, most women don't leave the house in the first six weeks and by the time they do visit them, the pattern of breastfeeding or bottle-feeding has already been decided upon and so it is too late. It isn't easy for a first time mother to join a group in the early weeks. She also may not have the courage to ring the breastfeeding helpline. Today's society lacks the community support that women long ago had. Fewer women are full time mothers who can lend their company. Fewer neighbours are available during the day to run errands for the home-bound mother. On top of that, many couples live miles away from their familial networks.

It is up to the health and community services to help provide the support needed to help women give their babies the best start in life. Upon discharge from a hospital, a simple check could be made on whether or not women have someone to help them breastfeed at home. If not, arrangements should be made to have a midwife or a breastfeeding counsellor visit the woman every day for the first week. It isn't enough to say to people to call someone or where to go.

Women will be less likely to give up if they have someone coming in to observe and answer questions. Community organised support could be tremendous support. Having someone pop by every day or every few days to help out, particularly in doing household chores or running errands, ensuring the woman is eating and resting or just providing company would be very useful. This is something that could be done jointly with voluntary groups. A network of 'lay people' would also serve to help prevent postnatal depression.

First time mothers in particular are prone to become depressed. During those first six weeks, being a mother can feel like a car crash. You are exhausted, your hormones are all over the place, your body is recovering from birth and you are grieving your old life. On top of that is the overwhelming sensation that you can never press pause. You may look to your partner but he may be unable to provide adequate support. Recent research has shown that men can suffer from post-natal depression, displaying symptoms of distancing themselves from the child and becoming withdrawn or aggressive and even withdrawing from the new family. A baby can also sadly trigger incidences of domestic violence. By having regular support provided by health and social services, the signs of post-natal depression can be detected. Furthermore, women can be prevented from becoming depressed in the first place. Being supported through the first six weeks can reassure them that they can do it and they can start enjoying motherhood. 



Mothers breastfeeding their babies during a worldwide breastfeeding event in Nicosia last year. Cypriot women joined women from other countries in a bid to raise awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding, as part of the World Breastfeeding Week.