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Attitudes towards breastfeeding among young people in Wigan

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The UK government supports the World Health Organisation recommendations that:

- ✓ Breast milk is the best form of nutrition for infants
- ✓ Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first 6 months (26 weeks) of an infant's life, as it provides all the nutrients a baby needs
- ✓ Breastfeeding (and/or breast milk substitutes, if used) should continue beyond the first 6 months along with appropriate types and amounts of solid foods
- ✓ Mothers who are unable to, or choose not to, follow these recommendations should be supported to optimise their infants' nutrition.

Breastfeeding provides all the nutrition a baby needs for its first six months of life.

However, inappropriate feeding is responsible for at least one third of infant malnutrition and associated with 60% of infant deaths around the world.

The evidence for the health and other advantages of breastfeeding is substantial and is summarised at the NHS Direct website at:

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/en.asp?TopicID=74&AreaID=5709&LinkID=4784

(you might find it easier to use the search facility).

Current situation

The current situation in the UK is:

- 71% of women in England and Wales

breastfeed their babies for some period of time. In 2002, the UK was third from the bottom among European countries in terms of exclusive breastfeeding rates for infants up to four months old, and was also the only country without a breastfeeding strategy.

- Statistics from 2000 show that 54% of mothers were breastfeeding their baby at two weeks old and 22% by 6 months old
- Across England and Wales, three-quarters (74%) of first-time mothers breastfeed their babies initially compared with two-thirds (65%) of mothers of subsequent babies
- There is a higher rate of breastfeeding in older professional mums who went on into higher education. The Department of Health is working to iron out these inequalities in health and encourage women in lower paid jobs, younger mums and those who left school at 16 to choose breastfeeding
- Only 46% of teenagers initiate breastfeeding

Other related statistics

- 84% of the general public think it's fine for mothers to breastfeed their babies discreetly in front of others
- Despite this, the National Childbirth Trust showed that 40% of participants in a 2004 survey incorrectly believed that most people disapprove of women breastfeeding in public
- The NCT survey also showed that people aged under 30 were the least well informed sector of quiz participants on the subject of breastfeeding

- According to a Social Exclusion report, each year 90,000 teenagers become pregnant, and of these 7,700 are under sixteen and 2,200 are under fourteen.

In this context, and aware of the low rates of breastfeeding among younger and poorer women, it was decided to include some questions about breastfeeding in the Wigan Health Lifestyle Survey that was conducted in Ashton, Wigan and Leigh Primary Care Trust.

Methods

The Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire offered by the SHEU is an established method for examining the current practices and attitudes of young people in a given community. When this survey is commissioned locally, it is quite common for local commissioners to seek additions or amendments to the standard questionnaire items.

The survey in Wigan took in a sample of young people from primary schools, secondary schools and the post-16 sector. The survey in secondary schools involved 728 pupils from 6 secondary schools and 1 Pupil Referral Unit, and among a list of over 90 questions on health and lifestyle issues was included the following item on breastfeeding. 639 pupils completed the following question:

How much do you agree or disagree with these statements?

0 = Disagree 1 = Not sure 2 = Agree

a Breastfeeding is best for mother and baby.

b Bottlefeeding is good enough for most babies.

c I want my babies to be breastfed.

d Bottlefeeding is easier than breastfeeding.

Please circle one number on each line

0 1 2

0 1 2

0 1 2

0 1 2

Results and Commentary

Overall figures (see Table 1)

There are a couple of immediate observations:

1. The attitudes of the young people are rather mixed, with about as high a proportion agreeing with each breastfeeding-positive item (a and c) as each bottle-feeding-positive item (b and d).
2. Perhaps quite consistently with this mixed picture there is a substantial vote for 'not sure' for each item; for items c and e there are more pupils choosing 'not sure' than the other options.

What is the significance of these results?

We might say that for most young people the choice for infant feeding is not an issue they expect to face soon. Although many teenagers do become pregnant (somewhere around 40,000 younger than 18 each year across England and Wales), it's more usual to start a family later - in 2002, the average age for first births was 26.7 years, three years older than in 1971. We might expect attitudes to infant feeding to firm up nearer the time of birth; there is evidence that teenagers decide later than other mothers in any event.

We don't have any comparison figures for these results, so whether young people in Wigan are untypical in their attitudes to breastfeeding cannot be judged at present.

There are interesting differences between pupils of different age and sex (see Table 2).

Again, a number of observations can be made:

1. While there are differences, these should be exaggerated: young people from different year groups and of each sex seem more similar than they are different for most items.
2. The biggest differences appear for items c and d (ranges 37%-57% and 35%-50% respectively).
3. The group most positive towards breastfeeding are the younger males. In the table,

tone has been added to the figures showing attitudes most positive to breastfeeding or least positive to bottlefeeding, and these tones occur mostly in the first column.

4. The group least positive towards breastfeeding are the older females. In the table, the figures showing attitudes least positive to breastfeeding or most positive to bottlefeeding are in italics and underlined, and they occur mostly in the last column. This must be seen as an unhappy trend for those who want to promote breastfeeding. [These differences are statistically significant.]

Attitudes and lifestyle

It is one of the strengths of the HRBQ survey method that we can see individual issues in the context of the rest of pupils' lifestyles.

We calculated an overall breastfeeding attitude score by adding the score for items a and c together and taking away the score for items b and d. Then we looked for associations with other dimensions of lifestyle by calculating correlations. We looked especially among the older females, as being the group closest to the issue of infant feeding.

Among the 136 Year 10 females who were given a score, we see:

- a higher breastfeeding attitude score if the pupils report:
 - Intending to stay in full-time education
 - Having more portions of fruit/veg to eat on a normal school day
 - Parents always know if they drink at home
 - They regard cannabis oil as always unsafe
 - Have confidence in diaphragm as a contraceptive
 - Doing homework last night
 - Using a computer for school work
 - Having more pocket money
 - Enjoying physical activities
 - See themselves as more fit

We also see:

- a lower breastfeeding attitude score if the pupils report:
 - Intending to train for employment at 16
 - Close friends smoke

- More people smoking at home
- Spending money on discos or clubs

These findings in many ways reflect the earlier impressions we have of breastfeeding as being more popular among the professional classes.

Discussion

It seems that the attitudes of young people in schools towards breastfeeding - like their attitudes towards many issues - are still developing. In this respect, teenagers seem to be an important group for breastfeeding promotion and schools would seem to be a natural venue through which to approach an initiative with this objective.

While groups with a strongly pro-breastfeeding stance like the National Childbirth Trust have been visiting schools for years, there has been a recent groundbreaking initiative run under the umbrella of a successful peer-led breastfeeding promotion project called Breastfriends in Doncaster. In 2002, the group won a £15,000 grant to take breastfeeding promotion into schools.

One of the women involved was Danielle Thornton: 'It was fantastic,' she says. 'We had to sneak in under the title of "infant feeding" because breasts are linked with sex. But we just conveniently ran out of time when it came to talking about bottle feeding [...] It went down really well. Lots of the teenagers said to us they would consider breastfeeding - although some said they still thought it was disgusting. At least now they have the knowledge.'

However, we are also mindful of a remark made by Professor of Midwifery Mavis Kirkham who led the BreastFriends project: although she agrees it was a worthwhile exercise, she would 'never again' work inside the education system. "It's well nigh impossible to take breastfeeding into schools. You can't work under nutrition. It's not citizenship or personal, social and health education. And I feel it's wrong to put it under sex education. In the end we retreated from the bureaucracy."

So, rather than blandly recommending more work in schools, we would prefer to urge people to examine the barriers to including breastfeeding promotion work in school and other settings for young people. Undoubtedly some of these could be listed already - the endless stream of initiatives in schools and the burden of a quart of curriculum to be delivered in a pint-pot of timetable - but it seems from the experience of Prof. Kirkham that there are some extra specific difficulties when it comes to breastfeeding. As ever, a clear signal from figures in central government would doubtless enable some of these barriers to be overcome.

Table 1 - Statement

	N	Disagree	Not sure	Agree
a Breastfeeding is best for mother and baby.	638	8%	41%	51%
b Bottlefeeding is good enough for most babies.	639	9%	46%	45%
c I want my babies to be breastfed.	637	17%	53%	30%
d Bottlefeeding is easier than breastfeeding.	634	10%	44%	46%
e Breastfeeding is good to start with but I would expect it to stop soon.	628	11%	46%	44%

Table 2 - Differences between age/sex groups

	Year 8		Year 10	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
a Breastfeeding is best for mother and baby.	54%	53%	50%	<u>45%</u>
b Bottlefeeding is good enough for most babies.	41%	47%	43%	<u>48%</u>
c I want my babies to be breastfed.	35%	29%	28%	<u>27%</u>
d Bottlefeeding is easier than breastfeeding.	<u>37%</u>	57%	<u>37%</u>	53%
e Breastfeeding is good to start with but I would expect it to stop soon.	44%	46%	<u>35%</u>	<u>50%</u>
Total Sample (N)	219	211	150	155