

Exploring the wider social value of breastfeeding peer support groups: perspectives from mothers and peer supporters

A community health fellowship project

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Background

- Well established health benefits of breastfeeding for baby and mother with significant cost savings for NHS
- High initiation rates (81%) but sharp drop off by 6 weeks (55% any breastfeeding, 23% exclusively)
- Over 80% who stop would have liked to feed for longer
- How can we support continuation?





Study methodology

- Qualitative approach
- 8 focus groups with peer supporters and mothers across 4 locations in Dorset
 - Wimborne, Poole, Dorchester, Sherborne
- Convenience sampling
- Questions designed to explore the value of group
 - Also asked about role of GPs in supporting breastfeeding
- Transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis



Themes: Mothers

Building a social network

“I made some amazing friends, like friends for life”

“You don’t feel like there’s that many breastfeeding people around but coming here you realise there is... I’ve got so many breastfeeding mummy friends now through coming here”

“F is still friends with a lot of the children that we met and so that group of mothers is still my support group now”

Confidence/Normalising

“the confidence to trust your instincts a little bit and not to worry about all the other babies doing this..”

“the confidence to carry on feeding, when you get comments from family members that you should stop”

“I was very conscious about feeding in public so I didn’t go out in the first couple of weeks in case she was hungry, but coming here and seeing everyone do it, you think you can do it quite subtly as well”

Solidarity and support

“I was ready to give up but everyone kept me going”

“It’s very hard in the beginning because your baby just wants you because you’ve got the milk and that’s really hard to get through so it’s nice to come here and you can discuss that”

“It’s nice seeing people where everything looks easy, when maybe you’re at your wits end because everything is so hard, and them saying well actually it wasn’t always easy”

“When you’re really struggling at the beginning it can be quite lonely and to be able to come to a group and see people that have got through what you’re going through and have got out the other side, I think that can be really valuable”

“It doesn’t matter how bad a night is and if I’ve not managed to brush my hair or I’ve only got jogging bottoms on, or if I just need to come and burst into tears, that’s all ok here!”

Themes: Peers

Personal fulfilment

“It’s just been a real feel good factor knowing you can make a difference”

“It gives me such a boost coming here, sees me through to the end of the week, when I cant come in because of the holidays, I really miss it”

“It’s pretty much the highlight of my week, I really enjoy it”

Mutual Support

“I feel like we’ve got a little community”

“It feels like I’ve got a bunch of people who’ve got my back”

“As peer supporters ourselves we have our own kind of connection... you get to support each other”

Personal Development

“I really enjoyed the training, just learning again was a real thrill”

“It’s teaching me to listen and so it’s making me a better person, it’s helping in other areas of my life, helping me listen to my children”

“It’s given me confidence to talk to strangers, like at school drop off I’ll go up and talk to the other parents now”

Career progression

“I’ve definitely used it when applying for new jobs, I always talk about it and put it on my CV, and I always reference it and the skills its given me”

“I’m going to college in September to do an access course and hopefully on to university to do midwifery”

“I’ve gone on to volunteer at other places... the confidence I’ve got from here I’ve been able to use that somewhere else”

Conclusions

- Range of benefits to mothers likely to support successful breastfeeding and mothers' wellbeing
- The peer supporter role provides fulfilment, support and personal and professional development
- Benefits from peer support groups could be extended to other areas of health
- Further research
 - How can GPs better support breastfeeding mothers?
 - Breastfeeding knowledge amongst GP trainees

