



SUPPORTING BREASTFEEDING IN YOUR PROGRAM

Amanda Perez

It is 11:30 a.m., and 3-month-old Jeremy starts to fuss. Joelle picks him up. “You’re getting hungry,” she says. “I see your mommy coming in now.” When Luanna opens the door, Joelle delivers Jeremy into her arms. “He’s ready for you!” she says. Luanna nuzzles Jeremy, “Let’s go feed you, sweet baby!” She opens the door to a small side room with a rocking chair. When Jeremy finishes breastfeeding, he is asleep. Luanna places him gently in his crib, and stops to talk to Joelle for a few minutes before returning to work.

Amanda Perez, MSW, is a senior writer and training specialist with the Early Head Start National Resource Center. She has particular interest in the role of community-based providers in the promotion and support of breastfeeding in low-income communities. Amanda has served on the Breastfeeding Promotion Committee of the Food and Drug Administration and on the Expert Work Group on Breastfeeding for the Office of Women’s Health/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



WHEN JOELLE STARTED AT THIS CENTER, she did not know much about breastfeeding. In fact, she had never even seen anyone breastfeed before she toured the center during her interview. It was the end of the day, and a mother was breastfeeding her baby before taking her home. To be honest, Joelle felt a little uncomfortable. Later, when the director offered her the job, Joelle asked about breastfeeding. “I’m so glad you asked!” said Sharon. “Some people have strong opinions about breastfeeding. There’s lots of new research that shows that breastfeeding is beneficial for babies and mothers. We work together here to find ways to support breastfeeding moms.”

Through the research Sharon shared with her, Joelle learned that breast milk is optimally designed for babies, and it has short- and long-term benefits. She found out that breastfed babies tend to be healthier, with reduced risk of ear infections, respiratory infections, diarrhea, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and obesity in childhood (Ip et al. 2007). Joelle also learned that breastfeeding reduces the long-term risk of some serious illnesses, including leukemia, Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, and asthma (Ip et al. 2007).

Joelle noticed that there are benefits to mothers too. Breastfeeding moms have a lowered risk of breast and ovarian cancers. Joelle was impressed to learn that breastfeeding has also been shown to support the mother-baby relationship. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that babies be breastfed until they are at least a year old (AAP 2005).

But breastfeeding, natural and healthy though it is, can be tough, particularly in communities where there is little encouragement for breastfeeding mothers. In one survey, when asked to identify the barriers to breastfeeding, mothers most often cited busy schedules, embarrassment, and lack of support (Best Start Social Marketing 1997). Child care settings,

and providers like Joelle, can offer nursing mothers a vital sense of welcome and community. This support can have tremendous impact on a mother’s decision to breastfeed for as long as possible.

When Luanna was pregnant and visited Joelle’s center, she mentioned that she was planning to breastfeed. “Oh!” Joelle said with a smile, “What a wonderful thing to do for your baby! We will support you here in any way we can.” With those simple words, Joelle communicated powerful enthusiasm for Luanna’s choice, enthusiasm that Luanna remembered when breastfeeding was challenging.

Luanna thanks Joelle as she walks out the door to return to work. Joelle recognizes she has become a quiet community support for breastfeeding mothers and their children. She feels great knowing she is making a real difference for Luanna and her son. By offering accurate information about breastfeeding, speaking with her director to help develop breastfeeding-friendly policies, building a breastfeeding-welcoming environment in her classroom, and offering support and encouragement to families, she has a powerful impact on supporting the health and well-being of the babies in her care.

What caregivers can do

What can you do to support breastfeeding?

Get the facts! Check out the websites listed in the sidebar for up-to-date information about breastfeeding. Your local Women, Infants and Children (WIC) office and local hospitals or birthing centers can be great resources for you and for nursing mothers.

Review your policies. Many child care programs develop policies related to feeding. Is breastfeeding addressed in your program’s poli-

cies? How does it guide your work? A sample baby-friendly policy is available at http://healthvermont.gov/wic/documents/childcare_policy.pdf.

Offer a clean, comfortable area where mothers can breastfeed.

Breastfeeding mothers often want to feed their children at drop-off and pickup and may be able to come during the day to breastfeed. Not every center has a separate room they can dedicate to breastfeeding. Bathrooms and janitor closets are not clean or comfortable places for feeding. Ask mothers if they prefer to breastfeed where they can talk with other families or in a quiet corner. Programs can create a private space with a curtain and a moveable rod.

Learn how to handle, store, and use breast milk.

A mother's milk is precious! Make sure your facility is prepared to store and handle breast milk and that you know how to do it safely. A poster for child care providers on the basics of the handling and storage of breastmilk is available at www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20071129021305.pdf.

Prepare to provide ongoing support.

Breastfeeding families often have questions. Mothers may need encouragement, information, and support as they return to work or school and continue to breastfeed. Identify local organizations to which you can refer families who need more help with breastfeeding. Develop a resource book to help answer families' questions. A resource list was developed for Early Head Start providers to help them support breastfeeding families after the birth of a baby; find it at www.ehsnrc.org/Publications/breastfeedingtoolguide/page8.html.

Respect family choice. Of course, not every family will choose to breastfeed. Your role is to provide accurate information and support to every family you serve. Offer understanding and encouragement to all

For more information and materials on breastfeeding, please see the following resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding

The National Women's Health Information Center at the Office of Women's Health—www.4woman.gov/breastfeeding

Resource Kit for Breastfeeding-Friendly Child Care Centers—
www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/pdf_files/BreastfeedingFriendlyChildCareCenters.pdf

United States Breastfeeding Committee—www.usbreastfeeding.org

WIC Works!—www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks

families, including those who decide not to breastfeed or choose to stop breastfeeding before their baby is 1 year old.

THINK ABOUT IT

Feeding is not just about food or facts—it is also about feelings. Consider your beliefs about breastfeeding and where they come from. How are infants and toddlers usually fed in your community? Were you or your siblings breastfed? How does your family view breastfeeding? How did you or do you feed your own babies? Understanding your own experiences with and feelings about breastfeeding helps you to help families.

As you learn about breastfeeding, think about what you already know and do in your program. Which of the strategies listed below will work for you? How will you use them to provide a comfortable place for families to feed their infants and toddlers?

TRY IT!

Examine your environment. Use the environmental self-assessment at www.health.state.ny.us/prevention/nutrition/cacfp/docs/cacfp-177.pdf to look at how your program welcomes and supports breastfeeding. Is breastfeeding represented in the pictures on the walls and in children's books? Is breastfeeding included on your intake forms and daily reports? Does the toddlers' housekeeping area include slings and breastfeeding pillows as props? A printable "Breastfeeding Welcome Here" symbol is available at www.breastfeedingsymbol.org/download.

You can use it to designate your center as a friendly space for breastfeeding.

References

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