



Parent *and* Baby Friendly:

Enabling Informed Decision Making and Respecting Parent Choices in Infant Feeding

Executive Summary

The first 1000 days of life are the most pivotal point for the development of a child and good nutrition during early life plays a key role in determining lifelong health.

BSNA members recognise breastfeeding is the best way to feed an infant and that it is important for both mother and baby's health and wellbeing. Our members fully endorse initiatives to increase the rates of breastfeeding in the UK. However, when a mother cannot, or chooses not to breastfeed, bottle feeding with a scientifically developed formula milk is the only suitable and safe alternative.

BSNA members are concerned that many parents are not receiving sufficient information and advice to ensure they are able to make informed choices on how they feed their infants. This report outlines the findings of a survey commissioned by BSNA to explore the views of midwives and health visitors on their ability to support parents in their decisions around infant feeding. It also reports on whether parents feel empowered to make informed choices and explores what support, advice and information they need both during pregnancy and in the first year of parenthood.

Headline Findings

HCP Findings

Majority of HCPs will only provide formula feeding information if:

77% Parents state they plan to formula feed

70% Parents specifically ask for information



1/4 of midwives and 1/3rd of health visitors agree: **there is too much focus on breastfeeding**

1/4 of midwives **do not believe** that new parents receive **sufficient information** to make an informed choice about feeding



83% of midwives/HCPs agree: **combination feeding can be a good thing**

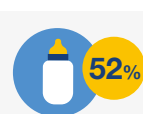


41% of HCPs say their **Trust policy stops them** from giving information about formula proactively

Parent Findings

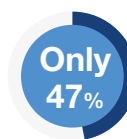
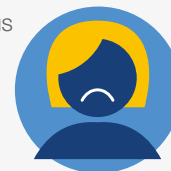


40% of mothers feel that there is **"too much focus on breastfeeding"** in the information and advice provided by HCPs



52% of mothers would like **more information about formula**

Given the lack of advice, and the focus on breastfeeding, mothers report feeling **guilty, pressurised, ashamed and unprepared**



Only 47% received information on **using a combination of breast and formula milk** from a health visitor

Call to Action



Parents' decisions on how they feed their babies should be respected and information on formula feeding should be given to all parents antenatally and postnatally.



Hospital Trusts, Local Health Boards and Clinical Commissioning Groups should ensure that midwives and health visitors are enabled to provide information and advice on formula feeding proactively.



Parents should be offered more support on combination feeding as an option in extending the length of breastfeeding if mothers are struggling with breastfeeding or wish to introduce formula into their feeding routine.



The Government's new Infant Feeding Survey should build on the results of this research project to better understand how mothers can be better supported with their feeding choices and appropriate and timely discussions can take place with HCPs that recognise the changing needs of mothers through their feeding journey.



An independent audit of the Baby Friendly Initiative implementation in local areas should be introduced to ensure parents are supported to make informed infant feeding decisions.

Introduction

The NHS Long Term Plan recommends UNICEF UK Baby Friendly accreditation across all maternity services and includes a focus on improved support for families with infants in neonatal care.¹

Currently 92% of maternity services and 91% of health visiting services are working towards Baby Friendly accreditation, with 62% and 72%, respectively, having achieved full accreditation.²

The Baby Friendly Initiative is a framework that aims to support breastfeeding and good infant nutrition, and to help parents to develop close and loving relationships with their babies. UNICEF UK states that its objective is: “To ensure that families receive effective infant feeding support, enabling them to make an informed choice about feeding, get breastfeeding off to a good start, overcome challenges and feed their babies responsively. Parents who formula feed are supported to use the most appropriate formula, make up feeds and give feeds as safely as possible.”³

However, through this survey we have heard from both healthcare professionals and parents that there is a significant gap in the support and advice available to parents on infant feeding beyond encouraging and enabling breastfeeding.

The journey to parenthood is both an exciting and emotional time. Once a baby is born, for many parents there is a steep learning curve, with new experiences and challenges as they learn to care for their newborn. At this time, it is important that parents are respected and supported in their decision on how to feed their baby and are able to make appropriate and informed choices, whether they choose to breastfeed, to use formula, or a combination of both.



Survey Methodology

Research conducted between August-September 2020 through a **two-phase study** with both **healthcare professionals** (midwives and health visitors) and **mothers of babies under 12 months old**

Stage 1



15-minute online surveys conducted with:

- **100 HCPs (including 20 in Scotland)**, comprised of 50 health visitors and 50 midwives who provide antenatal and/or postnatal feeding advice (breast milk, formula milk and/or weaning) to at least 15 parents in a typical month
- **255 mothers (including 75 in Scotland)**, comprised of 113 with a baby under 6 months old and 112 with a baby aged 6-12 months

Stage 2



30-minute qualitative interviews conducted with:

- **10 HCPs** from the quantitative sample, comprised of 5 midwives and 5 health visitors, following completion of the online survey
- **20 mothers** from the quantitative sample, comprised of 10 with a baby under 6 months old and 10 with a baby aged 6-12 months, following completion of the online survey

1. National Health Service. (2019) 'Maternity and neonatal services', in The NHS long term plan. Available at: <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/online-version/chapter-3-further-progress-on-care-quality-and-outcomes/a-strong-start-in-life-for-children-and-young-people/maternity-and-neonatal-services/> [Accessed: January 2021].

2. UNICEF. (2020) Accreditation statistics and awards table. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/babyfriendly/about/accreditation-statistics-and-awards-table-2/> [Accessed: January 2021].

3. UNICEF. (2019) UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative Theory of Change. [pdf] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/04/Baby-Friendly-Initiative-Theory-of-Change.pdf> [Accessed: January 2021].



Findings in detail

Healthcare Professionals

HCPs play an essential role in supporting good early life feeding and nutrition, including encouraging and helping mothers with breastfeeding, and providing consistent, unbiased advice to mothers and families.

To enable parents to make an informed decision about their baby's nutrition, HCPs should have up-to-date knowledge about all forms of infant feeding, including breastfeeding and formula feeding and be familiar with the benefits and suitability of each feeding method. Indeed, the BFI mission statement sets out principles for public services to both promote breastfeeding and support informed choice in feeding.⁴

HCP Information Sources

When seeking information on formula and breastfeeding, HCPs rely on:



BFI guidance

90% Midwives

96% Health visitors



Other NHS sources

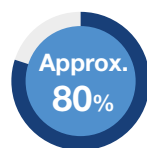
84% NICE guidance

82% The Healthy Child Programme



Other HCPs

50-72%



Approx. 80% of HCPs also believe information on formula feeding topics would be valuable from an industry body that represents formula companies

Almost all HCPs surveyed in this research, (96%) agree that “all new parents should be offered information about infant feeding antenatally”. However, there appears to be a sense from many HCPs that this information is currently limited. A fifth of HCPs do not believe that “new parents receive sufficient information about breast and formula feeding to be able to make an informed choice”.

HCPs state that they provide information to mothers on a range of infant feeding topics and the majority of HCPs (70%) feel that the balance of breastfeeding and formula feeding information provided to parents is about right in their service. However, a significant proportion believe the balance of information provided to parents on breastfeeding versus formula feeding is off kilter, with 25% of midwives and 30% of health visitors stating they believe there is “too much focus on breastfeeding”.

4. UNICEF. (2019) Guide to the UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative University Standards. 2nd ed. [pdf] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/accreditation/universities/> [Accessed: January 2021].

HCP Opinion on Formula



Over
43%

of midwives **do not agree** that “**new parents receive sufficient information**” about breast and formula feeding to be able to make an informed choice about how they will feed their baby



Only
6%

of midwives believe new parents **should not receive any information about formula at all**



70-77%

of HCPs will only **provide formula feeding information** if parents “state they are going to formula feed” or “**specifically ask for formula feeding information**”



This may be connected to how BFI guidelines are being implemented within local maternity and health visiting services, with nearly half (44%) of midwives and more than a third (38%) of health visitors surveyed stating that they are “restricted by their hospital or trust to provide formula feeding information”. This is despite the majority (83%) of HCPs agreeing that “combining breast and formula milk is a good option if it allows mothers to continue breastfeeding”.

“I do feel restricted in some way. I feel guilty I am not able to go with my judgement [in giving feeding advice]; it sometimes feels like you are backed into a corner.”



Findings in detail

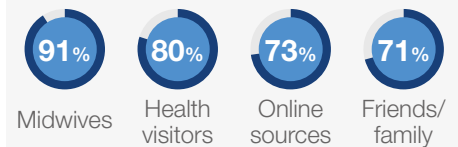
Mothers / Parents

Every woman wants the best for her baby and should be empowered to make decisions that are right for themselves and their babies. It is equally clear that both midwives and health visitors are committed to their roles in supporting women in achieving this. The results of this research survey reveal that HCPs are focussed on supporting mothers to breastfeed and to help them with challenges they face in breastfeeding.

Parent Information Sources



Information sources:



However, when asked the question about the balance of information and advice on feeding, **a higher proportion of mothers (40%) than HCPs feel there is “too much focus on breastfeeding”**

In follow up interviews in this research, mothers explained the emotional consequences, such as the guilt and shame that the perceived pressure to breastfeed can lead to.

“You’re almost made to feel like, by feeding formula, you’re failing and that you’re going to bring up a child with a whole host of problems in the future.”

Another mother describes her experience of formula feeding in a social situation: “I was so worried about other people’s opinions. A lot of mums all went to the changing rooms and started breastfeeding. I hid in a cubicle so I could heat up his milk and feed him. That was the kind of pressure I was under.”

Half of mothers (50%) exclusively breastfeed at the outset, a quarter (25%) begin with mixed feeding (combining breast and formula milk) and a quarter begin with formula feeding only. As such, 50% of mothers need to know about formula feeding at the outset. Of mothers who exclusively use breast milk to start feeding their new born, a third (16%) change their feeding routine to incorporate formula feeding at a later date. On this basis, 66% of mothers need to know how to formula feed.

Formula and Mixed Feeding

Mothers state that they received **less information on mixed feeding from HCPs** than they did for other feeding methods:



47%

who use mixed feeding **feel supported by information** from a health visitor on infant feeding



55%

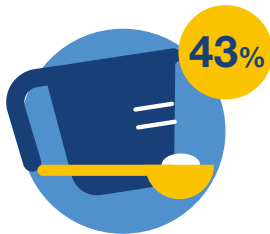
received information on using a **combination of breast and formula milk** from a health visitor



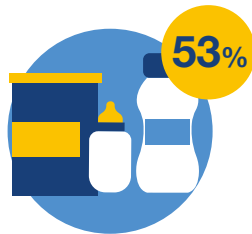
57%

say they **discuss formula feeding with a health visitor** vs. 90% who discuss breastfeeding

Over half of mothers would like to know more about formula feeding:



Interested in finding out **how to prepare formula milk**



would like to know more about **different types of formula milk**

Worried parents are rarely given advice about formula:



who have **struggled with breastfeeding** previously are given advice



who **worry they might struggle** with breastfeeding are given advice



“I almost felt less willing to breastfeed because it was literally pushed so much, **constantly being lectured on it.**”

“When I got to the point where I wanted to stop breastfeeding **there was very little support** to help the transition to formula-feeding.”



Without access to information and advice on formula at an appropriate stage, this can leave mothers (and fathers) feeling unprepared. It is therefore clear that mothers who choose mixed feeding for their infant should be given more information and advice from both midwives and health visitors to support their choice of feeding method. This is reflected in the view of midwives, where the overwhelming majority (83%) are supportive of mixed feeding if it extends the breastfeeding journey.

“I think make women more aware that breastfeeding isn't that easy, and to be prepared for quite a journey. Give more information on the options [formula and breast milk], rather than just the benefits of breastfeeding, makes it less negative.”



Conclusion and recommendations

There is a strong appreciation from mothers who took part in the research survey for the support and advice given to them by both midwives and health visitors. Both groups of HCPs remain trusted as a key source of information for infant feeding. However, it is also clear there are gaps and unaddressed information needs that have both practical and emotional consequences for parents.

Many mothers feel the central focus on breastfeeding, and associated lack of support for those parents who wish to try combination feeding, is leading to both practical and emotional consequences. In particular, mothers report feelings of worry, guilt and shame about their feeding choices. The commitment to supporting breastfeeding remains central to the care and support provided by midwives and health visitors, who are led by both the BFI framework and NICE guidelines, and this is to be welcomed.

However, there is a significant proportion of both midwives and health visitors who feel there is too much focus on breastfeeding. This can leave mothers without the necessary information they need to make an informed choice on how they feed their babies, a key principle within the BFI framework. The focus on supporting breastfeeding is being interpreted as not allowing discussion of other options, with some midwives feeling restricted by their hospital or trust in providing information on formula feeding.

From the views and experiences of both HCPs and mothers in this research, there is a clear gap in the information and support offered to mothers to enable them to make an informed choice in how to feed their baby and to help them with formula feeding if that is their choice.

To address these gaps and ensure parents are empowered to make informed choices on how to feed their infants, BSNA calls for:



Parental choice on how they feed their babies to be respected and information on formula feeding to be proactively provided both antenatally and postnatally.



Hospital Trusts, Local Health Boards and Clinical Commissioning Groups to ensure that midwives and health visitors are enabled to provide information and advice on formula feeding proactively.



Parents to be offered more support on combination feeding as an option in extending the length of breastfeeding if mothers are struggling with breastfeeding or wish to introduce formula into their feeding routine.



The Government's new Infant Feeding Survey to build on the results of this research project to better understand how mothers can be better supported with their feeding choices and appropriate and timely discussions can take place with HCPs that recognise the changing needs of mothers through their feeding journey.



An independent audit of Baby Friendly Initiative implementation in local areas to be introduced to ensure parents are supported to make informed infant feeding decisions.

We believe these are essential steps to be taken if infant feeding policy is to be both parent and baby friendly.



Acknowledgements

BSNA thanks those respondents who took part in our survey with Research Partnership for sharing their experiences. It is those experiences and the issues raised by HCPs and mothers that we seek to share with policy makers to improve the care and support that is provided to parents to be and as they enter the first weeks and months of caring for their newborn babies.

Thank you also to Research Partnership for their work in surveying healthcare professionals and parents and bringing those insights together to create a clear picture of the views of those caring for mothers and the needs of those mothers as they care for their babies.

About BSNA

The British Specialist Nutrition Association (BSNA) is the voice of the specialist nutrition industry in the UK. We are a trade association representing manufacturers of high quality foods designed to meet the needs of people with very special nutritional requirements, contributing a total of £2bn to the UK economy. Our members produce infant formula, follow on formula, young child formula, and complementary weaning foods, parenteral nutrition and medical foods as well as manufacture unlicensed, aseptically prepared intravenous (IV) solutions which are used to treat and/or manage a range of diseases, disorders and medical conditions. The specialist nutrition industry helps people to be healthy, survive and thrive at every stage of their lives.





The British Specialist Nutrition Association

10 Bloomsbury Way
London WC1A 2SL

info@bsna.co.uk
www.bsna.co.uk
@BSNA_UK