Breastfeeding – Teacher Guide

Please read before teaching Lessons Two and Three. Thank you.

Why should I talk to my students about breastfeeding?

Breastfeeding is often considered a subject that is only of interest to new mothers. In fact, it is a topic which is relevant and important to everyone as it helps make a healthier society. Teaching your students about breastfeeding involves more than explaining physiology and health. It provides a forum in which you can change attitudes, promote acceptance, teach about community resources, solve infant feeding problems, and even protect the environment and our social economy. When you educate students about breastfeeding, they will be able to make informed decisions that will affect them and those they will care about in the future.

Teens can be heavily influenced by the media. Yet, the media does not always portray accurate information or good decision-making. The way breasts are presented in the media leaves cause for concern: Breasts are heavily sexualized and rarely portrayed as organs providing a crucial biological function that supports good health for both mother and baby. Breastfeeding is almost non-existent in magazines, on television or film. For this reason, among others, people are still not used to seeing a mother breastfeed her children, particularly in public.

When teens view breasts from a sexual standpoint alone, they may have difficulty in perceiving breasts as the vital organs they are. Research shows that most teens make unconscious decisions regarding breastfeeding long before they are faced with choices about infant feeding\(^1\). This is why it is important to discuss the topic of breastfeeding in secondary school curricula – particularly in parenting classes. Simply exposing students to the benefits of breastfeeding can increase the likelihood of their acceptance and engagement in this practice later in their lives.

What information could help me teach my students about breastfeeding?

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching about breastfeeding. This may be due to unfamiliarity with breastfeeding or negative personal experience. In this teaching unit, you will find evidence-based strategies that can assist you in overcoming these challenges. In addition, you will find a list of local resources such as a breastfeeding helpline, breastfeeding clinics and breastfeeding support groups. Samples of Peel Public Health pamphlets and links to on-line resources will also be included.
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There are a few fundamental principles regarding breastfeeding:

*The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months, and then introducing nutritious complementary foods with continued breastfeeding for two years and beyond.*

Breastfeeding is the healthiest choice for babies:

There are benefits of breastfeeding, as well as risks of formula feeding. The benefits of breastfeeding extend to mothers, fathers, families and societies. Breast milk is a unique substance that completes the newborn’s immature immune system. Research has shown that children who are breastfed have lower rates of many serious medical conditions and diseases. These include pneumonia, bronchitis, respiratory tract infections, colds, meningitis, urinary tract infections, stomach and bowel infections, asthma, ear infections and sudden infant death syndrome. Breastfed babies are less likely to become overweight or obese, to develop breast cancer, allergies, diabetes, Crohn’s disease and rheumatoid arthritis.

Breastfeeding improves child brain development:

Studies even suggest breastfed babies grow up to have higher IQs. The numerous essential fats, as well as other components in breast milk, promote child brain development. The longer the child is breastfed, the more profound the effect on brain development of the child.

Marketing and attitudes in the media affect breastfeeding trends:

The female body has been successfully commercialised by industries to sell products with very lucrative outcomes. In particular, women’s breasts have been used to sell everything from body soap, to cars, to movies and music, to beer. Since advertising breasts as a means to feed babies does not make money for any industry, this message is much less visible in the media. If the health message could be successfully marketed in various media, perhaps trends and rates in breastfeeding could change.

Breastfeeding is a Human Rights issue:

Mothers have the legislated right to breastfeed any time and anywhere. They cannot be asked to leave, nor can they be denied access to a public place because they are breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is a reproductive health right for every woman and child. It is essential to fulfill every child’s right to adequate food and the highest attainable standard of health.
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Breast milk is a natural and renewable resource that is totally free of waste:

It’s free, always ready and available at the right temperature. Formula and processed baby foods are products that create ecological damage through excess waste in our landfills.

Most problems with breastfeeding are preventable or solved with evidence-based, knowledgeable support:

Research shows that less than one percent of women are physically unable to breastfeed. When students know that help for breastfeeding exists and there are community supports available, it assists them to develop skills in problem solving and accessing community resources for later parenting. Breastfeeding is a shared responsibility just as having a baby is a shared responsibility.

What are the most important messages students should take away from this lesson?

- The World Health Organization (WHO) and Peel Public Health recommend exclusive breastfeeding for six months continued with complementary foods for up to two years and beyond.
- Breast milk is superior to formula.
- The health benefits of breastfeeding extend well beyond childhood.
- Formula increases the risks of asthma, allergies, acute respiratory disease, infection from contaminated formula, nutrient deficiencies, childhood cancers, chronic diseases, obesity, gastrointestinal infections, mortality, ear infections, side effects of environmental contaminants, and reduced cognitive development.
- Mothers have the legislated right to breastfeed anytime, anywhere.
- Maternal benefits of breastfeeding are: quicker postpartum recovery through reduced postpartum bleeding and increased likelihood of losing excess weight gained during pregnancy. Mothers who breastfeed are less prone to diseases such as anaemia, ovarian and breast cancers, and osteoporosis and other chronic diseases.
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- In Peel Region, we have a number of community resources and supports for breastfeeding parents that are free and accessible to all families living and visiting in Peel.

References


4 Ibid.

5 After reviewing twenty published studies on the effects of breastfeeding on infant IQ, researchers suggest that breastfed babies' IQs may be three to five points higher than those of formula-fed babies. And the longer a baby is breast-fed, the greater the benefits to his or her IQ. Lead researcher Dr. James W. Anderson, professor of medicine and clinical nutrition at the University of Kentucky, attributes the higher IQ levels to brain food found in the mother's milk. The full study can be found in The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition (October 1999: 70). At least sixty percent of the average intelligence gain seen in breastfed infants comes from breast milk’s nutritional value, rather than benefits from maternal bonding. Please see the following website for more information: www.mercola.com/1999/archive/breastfeeding_linked_to_higher_iq.htm.

6 Ibid.

