

## Communicating the Benefits of Breastfeeding through Social Marketing

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Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life provides noteworthy health benefits for both mother and child including lowered risk for infections [1], gastrointestinal disorders [2], asthma [3], obesity [4], and diabetes [5] in children and reduced risk of maternal weight gain [6], postpartum depression [7], cancers [1], and diabetes [4] in mothers. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization find exclusive breastfeeding as providing an infant only breast milk without any additional food or drink including water [8,9]. A cost analysis found that if 90% of families in the United States follow medical recommendations to breastfeed exclusively for six months, the Nation could save \$13 billion per year and prevent superfluous deaths annually, approximately 95% consisting infants [10].

Research indicates that mothers may be facing several challenges that make it difficult to sustain breastfeeding. Despite women's reported desire to breastfeed [11], rates of exclusive breastfeeding at three and six months fall short of national goals. The majority of women start off breastfeeding their infants; currently, 77% of postpartum women breastfeed immediately following birth [12]. However, 38% of infants born in 2010 were exclusively breastfeeding at 3 months and only 16% were still exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months [12]. Moreover, 24% of all US born breastfed infants were supplemented with infant formula within two days following birth and over two-thirds of mothers began formula supplementation within the first 3 months postpartum. By 6 months postpartum, more than 70% of mothers stop breastfeeding all together [12].

According to the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding, [13] several of the key barriers include lack of knowledge, lactation problems, poor family and social support, belief that formula feeding is the normal feeding practice, embarrassment, lack of suitable health services, and employment and childcare that is unsupportive of breastfeeding. Particularly, the lack of acceptance of breastfeeding as a normative feeding practice creates several challenges for women striving to accomplish exclusive breastfeeding. Thus, unsupportive social norms pertaining to infant feeding may partially explain why numerous women who are aware of the benefits of breastfeeding choose to bottle-feed formula to their infants. Society prefers that breastfeeding be done in private spaces [14]. For example, a national public opinion survey conducted in 2001 found that only 43% of US adults believed that women should have the right to breastfeed in public spaces [15]. The belief that breastfeeding should only be conducted in private is counterproductive; to succeed at exclusive breastfeeding, new mothers may need to breastfeed in public since infants eat approximately every two to three hours. Worries about breastfeeding in public, including embarrassment and encountering negative reactions from others may prevent many mothers from breastfeeding when they are away from home, often resulting in early discontinuation of breastfeeding due to the challenges of succeeding without doing it in public [14]. Communication and social marketing campaigns must be developed and implemented to foster social acceptance of breastfeeding.

Public health efforts to increase breastfeeding rates should be broader and attempt to address negative societal attitudes of the general public [14]. Millions of dollars are spent on public health campaigns

to increase breastfeeding rates. However, these campaigns may not be effective because they may not address social norms that support formula feeding and negative attitudes discouraging breastfeeding. Communicating positive images of women breastfeeding their children would help to make it easier for a future mother to imagine herself breastfeeding in public and for community members of that mother to encourage and support the behavior [14]. The implementation of health promotion programs that work to change social norms and attitudes regarding infant feeding practices are needed. These factors have a large impact on a family's chosen infant feeding method, as can the nutritional, health, economic, and political implications of breastfeeding. Public health professionals, schoolteachers, lactation consultants, the media, and community members can implement health promotion programs and social marketing campaigns designed to change breastfeeding knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors and foster a breastfeeding culture.

Establishing a breastfeeding culture requires a comprehensive approach that should include federal, state, and local level coordinated efforts in the areas of legislation, policy, health care coverage, research, and education. Communicating to society as a whole and new parents about the significant benefits of breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months of life has largely been the responsibility of pediatricians, obstetricians, lactation consultants, and public health professionals. However, the message that breastfeeding is a normal, convenient, and the ideal infant feeding method must be communicated in a plethora of ways, beginning at a young age, in order for breastfeeding acceptance to be fully ingrained in our culture. Additionally, extending health communication efforts to include web 2.0 technologies and social media and marketing may increase society's exposure to and acceptance of breastfeeding, thus improving support for breastfeeding mothers.

Implementation of social marketing campaigns by federal, local and state health agencies as a means to educate and raise awareness regarding breastfeeding can be an effective approach to normalize breastfeeding. With the alarmingly high prevalence of chronic illness, obesity and the enormous potential of breastfeeding to reduce these health problems, it is critical to plan, implement, and evaluate innovative health communication strategies that inform and educate society on the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding.

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