

Why we recommend... Practical education for all health care professionals

(adapted from BFI UK web site www.babyfriendly.org.uk)

The majority of health professionals in Ireland have had little formal education in breastfeeding and lactation management. This has resulted in many health professionals being ill equipped to assist women to breastfeed, which in turn has resulted in many mothers being unable to breastfeed their babies successfully. The second of the Baby Friendly best practice standards - Train all healthcare staff in the skills necessary to implement the breastfeeding policy - is therefore critical to the successful adoption of the Ten Steps.

The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative recommends that all staff who have responsibility for caring for breastfeeding mothers receive an education which places an emphasis on practical skills and an understanding of the breastfeeding process. The aim should be to equip health professionals with a real understanding of how breastfeeding works so that they are able to understand why problems occur and how best to help women avoid them. At assessment, all relevant staff are expected to demonstrate the skills and underlying knowledge necessary to teach women how to position and attach their babies for breastfeeding and how to express their breast milk by hand. They are also asked to demonstrate a knowledge of how to help women to manage their breastfeeding successfully.

When planning an education programme, we recommend that the educators always bear in mind what will actually assist staff to implement the breastfeeding policy successfully. This is particularly important when the time allowed for training is relatively short. Ensuring that all sessions are kept relevant to the Baby Friendly best practice standards can help with this. For example, when planning a session on anatomy and physiology, it is possible to relate the information given to the implementation of Steps 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding, thus assisting the staff to understand how to apply the knowledge to their everyday practice. We also strongly recommend clinical practices in assisting mothers to learn the skills of positioning and attachment and hand expressing. The staff knowledge is only useful if accompanied by the skills to pass it on to mothers.

When preparing for a Baby Friendly assessment, a common mistake is to assume that staff already have this basic knowledge and that the training required is of a more academic level. Unfortunately, this can often result in staff finding it impossible to adhere to best practice standards for breastfeeding when faced with practical problems such as helping a mother whose baby is refusing to breastfeed or whose baby is gaining insufficient weight. It could be argued that all health workers should leave their pre-registration training with the basic skills needed to help breastfeeding mothers and that health care facilities should not have to pick up the bill for the extra training required to enable their staff to practise competently. Some universities and training courses are now paying more attention to equipping their students with these skills, but not all as yet. In the meantime, when planning training, we recommend you concentrate on basic and practical issues, for the benefit of staff, mothers and babies.