

## Best Buddies

### – peer support to help women to continue to breastfeed

One of the targets assigned to SureStart Local Programmes is to “provide information and guidance on breastfeeding, nutrition, hygiene and safety to families in their area”. Progress toward the targets is assessed by monitoring the percentage of babies breastfed at birth, 6 weeks and 17 weeks of age.

To help them work toward the target, SureStart programmes in Sandwell recently purchased a 'train the trainer' course - to train SureStart staff how to train local parents to become breastfeeding peer supporters.

The aim of this report is to document the process so far and record what trainees felt about the course.

### What is 'best buddies'?

Best Buddies is a peer breastfeeding support programme developed for a number of SureStart programmes in Birmingham. Local mums interested in becoming peer supporters were invited to take part in a 10-week training course to teach them about breastfeeding and how to support other women who were having difficulty breastfeeding. In addition, the Birmingham SureStart programmes jointly funded a worker paid to visit mums on the delivery wards of local hospitals to introduce them to the peer support service and, if appropriate, put them in contact with a peer supporter in the area they live.

Anecdotal feedback suggests that the service has been very well received in Birmingham and whilst monitoring/ evaluation data isn't currently available, this is being collected - by the peer supporters completing 'timesheets' to record the contacts they have and the feeding methods used by the women referred to them at 6, 12 and 16 weeks.

The approach has been developed into a package of training and is currently being offered to SureStart programmes and other agencies on a 'train the trainer' basis -

that is programmes/ agencies are able to identify individuals to be trained to deliver training on to parents, to enable those parents to become peer supporters.

Such training was delivered in Sandwell in November/ December 2004 at a cost of £3,000 (excluding staff time to attend the training). This enabled up to 20 people to undertake the training. 15 people completed the course. Those attending included midwives, health visitors, maternity support and outreach workers from Sandwell SureStart programmes and 2 mainstream health visitors from Sandwell.

## Why the interest in promoting breastfeeding?

The benefits of breastfeeding are very well researched and documented and include things such as:

- **Babies** - lower rates of sudden infant death syndrome (cot death) and gastroenteritis, lower blood pressure, asthma and diabetes later in life
- **Mothers** - lower rates of early breast cancer, cervical cancer, ovarian cancer & osteoporosis

As a result, the World Health Organisation recommends that babies are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life.

However, despite everything that is known about the benefits of breastfeeding, the rate of breastfeeding across the UK is low in comparison with other European Countries. Approximately 70% of UK mothers initiate breastfeeding, and the rate is even lower in the deprived areas SureStart Local Programmes operate within. In addition, many women who initiate breastfeeding stop quite quickly - a fifth give up within a fortnight. Research shows that many stop before they really want to, due to factors such as babies rejecting the breast, painful nipples and insufficient milk, all of which are seen to be avoidable problems. (For more information refer to the Infant Feeding Survey, 2000).

## Why peer support?

Encouraging breastfeeding is high on the health agenda. As a result, a significant amount of research has been undertaken to find out what works in encouraging breastfeeding initiation/ continuation.

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that peer support is a very promising approach. It appears that women value peer support and learning from other women's

experiences<sup>1</sup>. As a result policy makers are endorsing the approach as good practice to encourage breastfeeding continuation. In addition there is a belief that it should also encourage breastfeeding initiation, by making breastfeeding a more commonplace and accepted activity.

## Feedback on the Best Buddies training held in Sandwell SureStart programmes

A simple feedback questionnaire was sent to each of the 15 people who undertook the training, after the final session. 7 were returned and the views of these people are summarised below:

### *What did they think of the training?*

People were asked to rate the training as excellent, good, OK or poor. 4 felt it was excellent and 3 felt it was good. They feel the course was well taught/ presented. 2 said it gave them much more confidence to go out and support breastfeeding mothers and 1 said she found the section on producing visual aids to explain how breastfeeding works very useful.

Different people took different things from the course:

- \* Information about positioning and latching on was the most commonly mentioned learning point
- \* Others found that they learnt general training/ presentation skills
- \* Some trainees already knew quite a lot about breastfeeding so felt they didn't necessarily take away new knowledge, but still found the course interesting and feel it was valuable to help ensure different people took a similar approach to encouraging breastfeeding

### *Do they think the best buddies scheme has the potential to encourage breastfeeding in Sandwell?*

4 people feel it definitely has, but the other 3 are unsure. Those who feel it does have the potential to encourage moms to continue breastfeeding for longer and that it is a useful approach as support won't be restricted to working hours. Those who are unsure feel there is a culture of not breastfeeding within Sandwell that will be difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Hoddinott, P. (2004) Peer Support: evidence based or fashion? The UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative Annual Conference 2004

turn around. They also feel that there are a lot of issues to consider about how the scheme will actually work in practice, particularly bearing in mind the limitations of SureStart postcode boundaries.

A further complication is that 6 out of 7 people who returned a questionnaire think it will be hard to find women prepared to train as a best buddy - generally because of the significant commitment of time it will require from the women.

### *Do people feel they will be able to put the training into practice?*

5 people feel they are now much better equipped to support breastfeeding women. The other 2 feel they are a bit better equipped, but that they were already confident of their ability to do so before the training.

All of the respondents would like to get involved in running a course for parents although 2 feel that they only have some of the skills needed to do so. Unfortunately they didn't state what skills they feel they are lacking.

## **Conclusion**

The course has certainly been valuable in terms of the additional knowledge and confidence to support breastfeeding moms many participants now have.

This value will hopefully extend further when it is translated into training for parents and establishing best buddies.

However as noted by respondents to the survey there are decisions to be made about how the programme will be rolled out. The first challenge will be to identify potential best buddies and to train them. The second will be to be able to put breastfeeding moms in contact with a best buddy at an early enough stage to make a difference and to support and supervise the work of the best buddies. It would be sensible to establish the necessary systems and processes to address the second challenge before starting to identify and train volunteers.

The other challenge relates to SureStart postcode boundaries. To maximise the potential impact of the best buddies approach it would seem beneficial if the various SureStart programmes adopt a co-ordinated approach and work very closely with mainstream service providers who are currently working to ensure a seamless approach to encouraging breastfeeding across the Borough.