The Role of Fathers in Supporting Breastfeeding Mothers

“It is a fortunate baby that has a close, loving relationship with both of his parents!” (Laleche, 2014)

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Tremendous Potential to Facilitate Successful Breastfeeding
- Many fathers mistakenly believe that breastfeeding is a role confined to mother and baby.
- Fathers can feel excluded from breastfeeding, or may feel they are a passive player.
- However, fathers play a very important role in breastfeeding and are key in order to make a successful family unit.

What is Father’s Role?
- Father is uniquely placed to promote a positive family attitude towards breastfeeding.
- If father has a sound knowledge base around the health benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and baby and understands the necessity of mother and baby needing to be together, he is more likely to prioritise the activity and give breastfeeding a strong endorsement.
- There is a difference between a partner who accepts his partner is breastfeeding and one that deliberately creates a successful atmosphere for this (Neifert, 1998).

Practical Help
- During feeding times there is plenty a father can do to help mother! Providing mother with all the fluids she requires or making a snack for her are two important tasks he can do. Bringing pillows to help with positioning of the feeding is also important!
- Father can also take charge of winding baby between changing breasts and at the end of the feed. They can also change baby at the end of the feed and soothe him to sleep.

Understanding the Importance of a Father’s Role
- Understanding their role is the first step in allowing father to actively participate which the Health Visitor plays a crucial role in.
- The New Birth Visit is the perfect platform to discuss the ways father can contribute, what his role is and encourage a cohesive unit between mother and father.

Providing Emotional Support
- Breastfeeding is hard work and can be physically and emotionally demanding. All new mothers require help and support to allow them to achieve success with feeding, and to overcome doubts or fears that they may have. This in turn will encourage breastfeeding to continue.
- In the early days after birth when mother is lacking in sleep and coping with hormonal changes, fathers are ideally placed in order to provide encouragement when mother may be wavering with the breastfeeding approach.

A Satisfying Relationship with Baby
- There are many activities that father can do in order to create a strong bond with his baby.
- Skin to skin contact is not an exclusive activity for mother and fathers can and should regularly undertake the this e.g. allowing a full breastfed baby to lie on father’s chest (Laleche, 2014).
- There is a huge body of research to suggest that human beings have a neuro-endocrine behaviour and depend of sociality and “bi-parental care”. Research further suggests that babies that have regular skin to skin contact with both mother and father possess better resilience in later life both physically and psychologically.

Fathers Value
- The value of a father to a baby’s life is evident. Building a strong attachment with baby in the early days greatly improves the relationship between father and baby as the infant grows and has an impact upon the socioemotional development of a child.
- Health visitors should be encouraging a cohesive family approach to breastfeeding as part of the Healthy Child Programme, and providing support and encouragement to both mothers and fathers.