

Feeling good about feeding babies



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Feeding babies can often be a joyful and satisfying experience. However things don't always feel so good. Many women suffer from shame, guilt and embarrassment, whether they are breastfeeding directly or feeding expressed breast milk or infant formula in a bottle or tube. Many feel unsupported. Sometimes women feel like they must justify their decisions to others. This can have serious effects on the wellbeing of the mothers and their babies. It can also make things difficult for health professionals and peer supporters who want to make sure all parents are informed and supported, however they feed their babies.

This is why earlier this year we launched the Feeling Good About Feeding Babies website (<https://feelingsaboutfeedingbabies.co.uk>), which was developed with colleagues from the Breastfeeding Network and NCT and fellow academics Laura Dennison and Marta Glowacka.

The site was launched in May at the All Party Parliamentary Group on Infant Feeding and Inequalities and has now received over 23,000 hits – with the feedback overwhelmingly positive (TABLE 1). It sets out to help parents and family members, friends, health professionals and others who provide support with feeding to have better conversations about how parents feed their babies. It is intended to help parents and those supporting them to think about their feelings, bust some unhelpful ideas and start supportive conversations.

The website brings together our research and stories from parents about their experiences. We each identify an unhelpful idea that can influence thinking about infant feeding decisions. These ideas are very powerful, so often they make



One of the graphics from the *Feeling Good About Feeding Babies* website.

“[It helped me to] Stop feeling guilt and shame.”

“Can help to change the narrative of shame and guilt against mothers and certainly will make a difference to our already stressful journey.”

“I think the resource is lovely, allowing us to think about our own response to our own choices about feeding as well as our responses to others' choices/lack of choice.”

“Finally, someone understands.”

TABLE 1 Prototype evaluation showed that mothers, health professionals and breastfeeding counsellors rated the website as useful – most would use the site personally, recommend, or use it as part of their own practice.

parents feel bad even when they don't agree with them. Lots of people are influenced by these unhelpful ideas – mums and health professionals included.

The duty mistake

Fiona is a philosopher of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. The unhelpful idea she identifies is ‘the duty mistake’. We, as a society, expect new parents, especially mothers, to justify their decisions about how they feed their babies. Both decisions to breastfeed and decisions to use infant formula are treated as requiring justification. Talking about decisions can be very helpful; feeling a need to justify is not. It is an odd feature of our culture that these background assumptions that justification is needed stick around even when people are trying to give non-judgmental help. The website explains why the expectation that mothers justify their decisions is a mistake and how this mistake can lead to problems, including women feeling pressure and judged, difficulties giving information about breastfeeding, and hostility and polarisation.

The individual focus

Heather is a social scientist specialising in public health, pregnancy and early parenthood. The unhelpful idea she identifies is ‘the individual focus’. As a society, we tend to focus too much on individual mothers and ignore the world they are living in. People often talk and act as if parents who want to breastfeed only need to make a ‘choice’ to do so – as if parents select an ideal feeding journey from an imaginary shelf.

Heather's research explores the many other factors

that can affect how people feed their babies, such as:

- how family and friends fed their babies
- what happened during birth
- what happened after the birth
- whether there was skilled help to solve problems
- family and work commitments
- whether initial problems were solved in the hours and days after birth
- whether skilled help was available when it was needed
- what is usual in the community or wider culture.

Heather's research explores how moving from an individual focus to an ecological focus – that considers the whole complex context within which individual decisions are made – can help with better conversations about how parents feed their babies.

Fiona and Heather's research supports the same conclusions in different ways. Dropping the duty mistake shows us that as a society we need to stop talking about what mothers must do when

it comes to feeding babies. Even if parents were able to freely choose how to feed, they do not have to justify these very personal decisions to others. Many women do not get a free choice. There are lots of barriers to women feeding their babies the way they want. Moving away from the individual focus reminds us that lots of things affect how parents feed their babies. Society needs to stop blaming mothers. But just getting rid of blame isn't enough. We all need to help parents to start feeling good about how they feed their babies.

Acknowledgement

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