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Breastfeeding Cafes



When new mum Mehjabin found herself alone in hospital and struggling to breastfeed her baby, there was no-one she could turn to for help.

"I felt really alone," she remembers. "I was having trouble feeding my daughter and when I asked the hospital staff for help, they told

me there was a midwife who can give advice but she wasn't on duty – what good is that?"

Having returned home with baby Ala'a, Mehjabin was still finding it difficult to feed her – it was then that she spotted a breastfeeding café holding weekly sessions nearby offering help and information for pregnant women and mums needing support or who would simply like to meet other breastfeeding mums. The café, run in one room of a Children's Centre nursery school in Walthamstow, north west London, is one of many across the UK funded by the government's Sure Start initiative, aiming to give support in the community to children under five and their families*. The session is run by breastfeeding counsellor Petra Hoehfurner and welcomes all women who are breastfeeding or considering breastfeeding.

"If you are finding it hard to feed your baby, coming to a café like this makes you realise that you are not on your own and that other women have similar experiences and that there are lots of different ways to breastfeed," explains Petra, who trained with the La Leche League (a worldwide breastfeeding support organisation).

"Here mums know they are not on their own and it introduces them to women living nearby who are also breastfeeding. Unfortunately, midwives are often understaffed and don't have the time, and sometimes the training, to support mums trying to feed their babies. There are so many benefits to breastfeeding that it is a tragedy if someone gives up and turns to formula just through lack of the right support and help."

At the weekly café sessions, Petra is on hand either to give help and information to mums whose babies aren't taking to breastfeeding, or simply to make a cup of tea and sit and listen. When Mehjabin first arrived, Petra was able to help her through those difficult early days of feeding her daughter. Although in the end she found bottlefeeding worked best for her, Mehjabin remains determined to breastfeed Ala'a and she knows the sessions will give her the support she needs to try again in the future, as well as giving her the chance to catch up with her new friends and meet other new mums.



"The café gave me the help and support I needed at a time when I was feeling so alone - even when you talk to your husband, they don't really understand."

Also at the session is second-time around mum Laura with her now six-month-old daughter Sarah. Laura received no support with her first baby and ended up bottle-feeding him so she was determined that, this time, she would breastfeed. However, again when she found she was having difficulties, there was no-one she could turn to for support.

"When I gave birth, Sarah had swallowed a lot of fluid from the womb which she was still bringing up 24 hours later so she wasn't feeding and it meant she didn't take to breastfeeding very quickly. I was on my own and didn't know what to do. At first I tried syringe feeding her but it was very time consuming. Then I found out about this group and I got the support I needed straight away. Petra talked through different positions I could try and I found a way that worked for us."



Petra is keen to stress that breastfeeding does not always work and there are mums that come to the sessions who have given breastfeeding a go and have decided that formula works best for them.

"Breastfeeding is a very natural process but sometimes physical or emotional barriers get in the way that prevent mothers being able to feed their babies. Often it is through a lack of support, then the mother uses bottles and the baby decides that it loves the easy option. As with Mehjabin, sometimes breastfeeding just doesn't work out but there is a lot of support for women who would like to breastfeed. In the end, it is what is best for you and for your baby."

by
Alice Metcalfe
June 2010

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* As a new UK Government took office on 11 May, government policy on initiatives such as Sure Start are subject to policy change.

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