

UNICEF UK BABY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE STATEMENT

RESPONSE TO THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF MIDWIVES (RCM) POSITION STATEMENT ON INFANT FEEDING



12 June 2018

Today the RCM released a position statement on infant feeding.¹ While Unicef UK welcomes the RCM's renewed commitment to the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding,² which includes implementation of the WHO/Unicef Baby Friendly Initiative, we would question interpretations of the statement that suggest that midwives do not currently respect mothers' informed infant feeding choices.

In the UK, infant feeding is a highly emotive subject because so many families have not breastfed, or have experienced the trauma of trying very hard to breastfeed and not succeeding, and this pain can close down conversations about feeding. However, given the extensive and resounding evidence of the value of breastfeeding,^{3,4} and research showing that 8 out of 10 mothers stop breastfeeding before they want to,⁵ it is imperative that health professionals are enabled to have open, empathetic conversations about infant feeding based on mothers' individual experiences and needs.

We interview midwives and mothers every week, and in our experience, the majority of staff in maternity services, from senior managers to maternity care assistants, are aware of the sensitivities around infant feeding, and do their best to ensure that all families' informed choices are respected and that they receive compassionate, evidence based care, irrespective of feeding method. Feedback we receive from mothers attests to staff's ongoing commitment to providing kind and professional support to feed their babies, despite staff shortages and acute pressures on midwives' time.

Whilst we agree with the RCM that all families should receive skilled support, the statement omits mention of the progress that has been made. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of numerous midwives, 92% of maternity services in the UK have made progress towards Baby Friendly accreditation,⁶ and work continues across the UK to raise standards of care further. The programme supports health services to improve care by setting standards, providing staff training and monitoring progress through audits and assessments.⁷ In this way, the initiative empowers staff to have meaningful and mother-centred conversations with

pregnant women, new mothers and their families about feeding and relationship-building. In addition, the programme enables staff to support: skin-to-skin contact following birth and in the early postnatal period; mothers to get breastfeeding off to a good start and to overcome any challenges they may face; families who formula feed to make up feeds and feed their babies responsively; and all families to build close and loving relationships with their babies.

In the UK, which has some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world,⁴ infant feeding is a complex and contentious public health issue which needs action across government, healthcare and wider society.^{3,4} We need to change the conversation and acknowledge that neither individual health workers nor individual mothers can tackle these issues alone.

Find out more about our work to help create an enabling environment for parents to feed and care for their babies.

- [Unicef UK Call to Action campaign](#)
- [Unicef UK Guidance for antenatal and postnatal conversations](#)
- [Unicef UK Guide to the Baby Friendly Initiative standards](#)
- [Results from Scotland's Maternal and Infant Nutrition Survey](#)

¹ Royal College of Midwives, (2018). Position Statement on Infant Feeding. <https://www.rcm.org.uk/news-views-and-analysis/news/rcm-publishes-new-position-statement-on-infant-feeding>

² World Health Organization (WHO), (2003), Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding. http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/global_strategy/en/

³ Acta Paediatrica (2015) Special Issue: Impact of Breastfeeding on Maternal and Child Health, December, Volume 104, Issue Supplement S467, Pages 1–134.

⁴ Victora CG, Bahl R, Barros AJD, Franca GVA, Horton S, Krusevec J, Murch S, Sankar MJ, Walker N, Rollins NC (2016) Breastfeeding in the 21st century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect. The Lancet Series: Breastfeeding 1. Volume 387, No. 10017, p475–490, 30 January.

⁵ McAndrew F, Thompson J, Fellows L, Large A, Speed M, Renfrew MJ (2012) Infant Feeding Survey 2010, Health and Social Care Information Centre <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB08694>

⁶ Unicef UK, Baby Friendly Statistics. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/what-is-baby-friendly/breastfeeding-in-the-uk/baby-friendly-statistics/>

⁷ Unicef UK, (2017). Guide to the Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative Standards. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/guidance-for-health-professionals/implementing-the-baby-friendly-standards/guide-to-the-baby-friendly-initiative-standards/>