

Breastfeeding during a pandemic – Partners implored to build the foundations for a ‘virtual village’

With more than half of Australia locked down due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) is calling for dads, partners and loved-ones to champion the practical support needs of mothers this World Breastfeeding Week (1 to 7 August 2021).

The theme for World Breastfeeding Week 2021 is ‘Protect breastfeeding: a shared responsibility’.

‘For infants, mothers and the community at large to enjoy the health benefits associated with breastfeeding, including the immunity against respiratory illnesses via breastmilk, support from “the village” is essential. Even prior to the pandemic, the support of dads and partners has consistently been shown to significantly improve breastfeeding duration and exclusivity rates,’ says Naomi Hull, Senior Manager, Breastfeeding Information and Research at ABA.

Some 61% of mothers seeking breastfeeding support from ABA reported being challenged, fearful or unable to access traditional face-to-face supports during Australia’s first COVID-19 wave. And in response, 64% of mothers sought support to protect their infants by restarting breastfeeding, continuing breastfeeding, or increasing milk supply.

A Vietnamese study has shown that when fathers (practically and emotionally) support mothers to work as a parenting team, this leads to improved infant development scores at 9 months, increases in the duration of exclusive breastfeeding, AND improves the relationship quality between the mother and father.¹

Similarly, a US study of 48,379 women who breastfed beyond 12 months found that 91.4% discussed this decision with their partner, whereas only half discussed it with their child’s GP/paediatrician.²

As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into its 18th month, ABA is calling on expectant parents and, especially, dads and partners to build the foundations for a ‘virtual village’ ahead of their newest arrival. ‘It’s as simple as booking yourself and your partner into an ABA breastfeeding education class (online or in person) and saving the Breastfeeding Helpline number into your phone,’ states Ms Hull.

‘Once armed with practical breastfeeding knowledge and backed by the support of our free LiveChat service and 24/7 Breastfeeding Helpline, prospective parents are well positioned to navigate the newborn phase together, with or without the support of their usual “village”,’ explains Ms Hull.

As social isolation is an all-too-common challenge for many new parents, the ready and regular local events and catch-ups (online or in person) provided by ABA’s national network of 130+ local groups have been filling the social connectivity and health services void created by the pandemic lockdowns.

‘Having connected with other mums prior to the birth, this “instant village” smooths the transition into motherhood, with ABA’s trained volunteers creating a judgement-free haven of support, evidence-based information and connection through the uncertainty of the pandemic,’ says Ms Hull.

To book an online or in-person breastfeeding education class go to: <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/breastfeeding-education-classes>, and for information about local World Breastfeeding Week events see here: <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/calendar-of-member-events>.

¹ Rempel, J.K., Rempel, L.A., Hoe D.T.P., Vi, L.T., & Long, T.K. (2020). Parenting Teamwork: The Impact of a Fathering Intervention on Mothers and Infants in Vietnam. *Child Development*, 91(2), e345-e364, doi: 10.1111/cdev.13244

² Chaconnes, A., Kim, S.A., Heffner, D., Adelman, A. (2018). Pediatric Care Providers, Family, and Friends as Sources of Breastfeeding Support Beyond Infancy. *Breastfeeding Medicine*, 13(2), 116-122, doi: 10.1089/bfm.2017.0184

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