HOLISTIC INFANT FEEDING OFFER

Whole system approach to improving infant feeding across Blackpool

A healthy diet and good nutrition in pregnancy and during the first four years of life are vitally important for a child's growth, development and long-term health. Providing the right advice and guidance to parents around their infants' nutrition supports increased breastfeeding, reduced dental decay, reduced future overweight and obesity along with reduced cases of gastroenteritis in infants due to poor bottle-feeding practices (whether with formula or breastmilk).

A holistic infant feeding offer across the Better Start Partnership, resulting in increased opportunities to provide advice and guidance from peers and professionals and a workforce development strategy, has led to improved outcomes for babies and their families.

Understanding the Challenge

Breastfeeding rates in Blackpool have historically been low against the national average. Nationally, 72% of mothers initiate breastfeeding with 49% continuing up to 6-8 weeks [1] (23/24).

In addition, there has also been an issue with poor bottle feeding practices alongside the early introduction of complementary feeding prior to the recommended six months. Three times the average number of young babies required hospital treatment at A&E with gastroenteritis concerns linked to poor bottle feeding practice.

Emerging evidence additionally supports the benefits of responsive bottle and breastfeeding being for parent infant relationships. Feeding on hunger cues, cries and signals to end feeding builds secure attachment, trust, comfort and emotional connections.

1: https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/search/breastfeeding

What we did

In 2018, the Better Start partnership developed its infant feeding strategy. This strategy was a multi-faceted, strategic approach to helping families make informed choices around infant feeding and the introduction of complementary foods when babies are around 6 months old. This also included providing workforce development and community level support.

During this period, foundations were laid to integrate a holistic offer through reinforcement of messages in additional visits as part of the expansion of the Health Visitor pathway, and infant feeding messages being integral to sessions in the Baby Steps antenatal programme. Data analysis identified that those mothers who attended Baby Steps between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 were 18% more likely to breastfeed their baby at birth and 10% more likely to maintain this at 6 months. Although this data was based on a small cohort (564 mothers), this is a positive indication of the impact of reinforcing infant feeding practice in antenatal care.

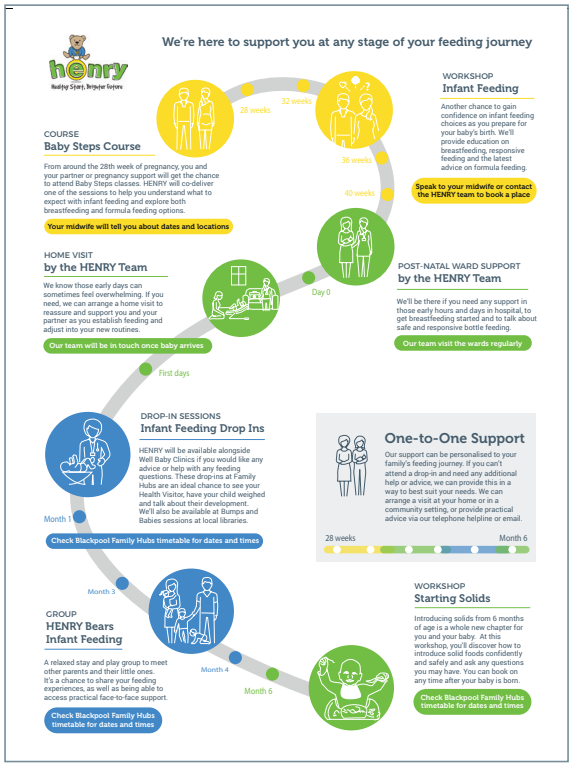
In October 2020, to expand the reach and impact, a peer support service was introduced alongside a workforce offer through HENRY Infant and Young Child feeding service. The service provides all parents in Blackpool support around infant feeding and nutrition regardless of their feeding choices, something that nationally wasn't common practice, with most peer support services only supporting breastfeeding mothers.

In 2023, the service was expanded with the use of Start for Life funding to include more contact points for families. This included increasing our presence in clinical and community settings and supporting the rollout of Baby Friendly training to the workforce, supporting practitioners' understanding of infant feeding and creating a model of sustainable support. In addition, an infant feeding app 'Anya' has been commissioned which supports parents digitally 24 hours a day, enabling them to access support and information.

The strength of the collaborative, town-wide commitment has also led to Blackpool Family Hubs receiving 'Live Birth Data' from Blackpool Teaching Hospitals and implementing a 6-day-a-week triage service. Staff who have received Baby Friendly Initiative training can contact parents in the first 48 hours after birth and offer appropriate messaging, signposting and referrals to specialist support if needed. To date, 80% of mothers whose contact details have been received have successfully been contacted with telephone calls and follow up text messages to reinforce infant feeding messages and ensure parents know where and how to access support.

> *My health visitor signposted me to HENRY for support as I again I was worrying if my baby was getting enough milk. I enquired online and someone called me and answered all my questions. They then followed up within the week and signposted me to the drop-in sessions. Again, this was a huge support and gave me a reason to leave the house and speak to other mums.*
>
> **Parent**

> *We were considering weaning our baby onto solid food. This was mostly because other parents with babies of a similar age were. We found HENRY and spoke to Vicky. She was very knowledgeable and gave us lots of reassurance. We decided against starting solids at that time because we felt our girl wasn't showing any of the signs she was ready. We embraced the baby-led approach, giving our baby food which was easy to hold on to and gave her the time and space to explore the food.*
>
> **Parent**



Guidance and signposting for parents and professionals

Outcomes

Increase of
10%
in the number of women in Blackpool breastfeeding within 48 hours of birth.

18%
less babies
being introduced to complementaryfoods prior to 6 months (since 2018)

Over
200
members of the Blackpool Workforce have received infant feeding training.

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