Paternal Involvement via Infant Massage - Improved Health and Breastfeeding Outcomes for Mothers and Infants

Kathy Parry, MPH, IBCLC  *  Miriam Labbok, MD, MPH, IBCLC

SUMMARY

Paternal involvement is associated with improved birth outcomes for infants, and breastfeeding lowers risk of health problems for infants and mothers. Interventions that support breastfeeding and improve paternal involvement should be supported. Paternal attitudes toward breastfeeding are supportive, yet many fathers feel left-out of the feeding relationship, and underestimate their ability to support the mother. Increased support for breastfeeding among partners is necessary. In addition, opportunities for father involvement other than infant feeding are necessary.

Based on a review of the literature about these topics, we propose implementation and testing of an evidence-based intervention consisting of infant massage instruction, coupled with education on how to support mother during the breastfeeding relationship. We regret that the literature review did not include female, trans or gender non-conforming partners.

Health Benefits of Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding has important health benefits for the mother and child.

- Infants who are not breastfed have a higher risk of diarrhea, ear infections, lower respiratory infections, leukemia, type 2 diabetes, asthma, childhood obesity, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.
- Mothers who do not breastfeed have a higher risk of breast and ovarian cancer, as well as metabolic disease.
- Breastfeeding also has beneficial psychosocial, economic, and environmental effects on individuals, families and society.

Paternal Support for Breastfeeding

Paternal support plays a significant role in maternal confidence and success with breastfeeding, yet this may be difficult for fathers to achieve.

- Fathers report feeling disconnected from the mother-infant feeding relationship, and feeling “helpless” when feeding difficulties arise.
- Feeding problems may isolate fathers and interfere with fulfilling his perceived role as father.
- Some fathers view formula feeding as a convenient way for them to interact with their infant and help relieve the mother of some caregiving duties. Supplementation with formula is detrimental to breastfeeding and carries health risks for mothers and babies.

Recommendations for Action

- Devise interventions that combine education for fathers on breastfeeding topics, including specific ways to help support the mother with breastfeeding, with a hands-on instructional component for infant massage techniques.
- Utilize previous lessons learned from interventions aimed at fathers, including allowing flexibility in the scheduling to accommodate work schedules.
- Fund and conduct research to determine the effects of this dual-focused approach on multiple outcomes, including paternal support for breastfeeding, maternal confidence and success with breastfeeding, number and quality of paternal interactions with infant, amount of paternal caregiving activities, and infant behaviors/growth.

Impact of Paternal Infant Massage

- Increased father involvement in caregiving activities
- Improved behavior during interactions with infant
- Improved positive bond between fathers and infants
- Improved infant sleep, growth, and stress behaviors
- Provides beneficial opportunity for one-on-one interaction with infant
- May detract from need to bond with infant via bottle-feeding, thereby supporting breastfeeding

Selected References