



NCT Briefing: Breastfeeding in Public Places

Breastfeeding makes life with a baby easier for mothers who want to be out and about with their baby. Breastmilk is always ready, at the right temperature and you don't have to carry anything extra. Women have a right to breastfeed in public places. In Britain the Equality Act provides protection against discrimination in the provision of services because a woman is breastfeeding. In Scotland babies also have a right to be fed milk in public places up to the age of two years. Sadly these legal rights do not extend to Northern Ireland, although the Sex Discrimination Act applies, which gives some protection against discrimination due to breastfeeding.

Health aspects

Breastfeeding is recognised as an effective health intervention to reduce health inequalities among children in this country. The NCT is keen to support parents however they decide to feed their children, but we promote breastfeeding partly because of the discrimination breastfeeding women experience. Mothers should not be made to feel that they have to hide away while they are breastfeeding. They should have the freedom to choose to feed their child when they need to be fed. Breastfeeding is the most natural and the healthy way to feed a baby and has benefits for both mother and baby:

- Non-breast fed babies have higher rates of diarrhea and vomiting,¹ respiratory and urinary tract infections,^{2,3} asthma and eczema,^{4,5} reduced cognitive development in childhood,⁶ higher average blood pressures^{7,8} and a greater risk of diabetes^{8,9} and obesity⁸.
- Women who do not breastfeed have an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer and of Type II diabetes in later life.⁸

Breastfeeding therefore has an important contribution to make towards meeting the national targets to reduce infant mortality and health inequalities.

The Equality Act and the Breastfeeding (Scotland) Act

After many years of campaigning by NCT and sister charities, the Equality Act 2010 gives women across Britain legal protection against discrimination when they are breastfeeding their babies. No one can be discriminated against, asked to leave a venue or be treated unfavourably because they are breastfeeding. The Act comes into force in autumn 2010 but actually clarifies previous protection under the Sex Discrimination Act.

In Scotland, the Breastfeeding (etc) Act came into force in 2005. It means that children under the age of two have a right to be fed milk in a public place.

Attitudes

An NOP poll, carried out on behalf of the Department of Health, with a representative sample, showed that 84% of adults do not have a problem with women breastfeeding their babies while they are out and about.¹

Women have widely differing attitudes and feelings about breastfeeding outside the home. Some women have no concerns about feeding in public places. Others feel hesitant about the idea, often because they feel self-conscious or because they are worried about being challenged. The NCT hopes that the Equality Act, 2010 will help to give women confidence to breastfeed wherever they are with their babies. Too many women feel they can only go out between feeds, or introduce formula milk before they planned to, so that they don't have to breastfeed when they are out. There is evidence that women who have not seen breastfeeding as part of everyday life, or have friends who have breastfed, find it much more difficult to make and sustain a decision to breastfeed.^{10,11,12,13}

According to the latest figures (2005) more than three quarters of women who stop breastfeeding in the first six months would have liked to breastfeed for longer.¹⁰ The perception that breastfeeding is not acceptable in public places is one of the factors that reduces the length of time women breastfeed.

Press coverage of the few cases of women who have been asked to move or leave a place because they were breastfeeding has the potential to add to the concern that some mothers feel. However, most people recognise that it can be done discreetly and hardly anyone will notice when a baby is feeding. The NCT is part of the Breastfeeding Manifesto coalition and campaigns for more establishments to welcome breastfeeding mothers and babies and to provide suitable facilities. Women should certainly not be made to feel ashamed, uncomfortable or unwelcome because they are feeding their baby in the healthiest way possible.

If more women felt comfortable breastfeeding when out with their baby, this would help to break the cycle that keeps breastfeeding hidden and perpetuates a bottle-feeding culture. It is especially important that young women are encouraged to consider breastfeeding and are not put off by a perception that it is less socially acceptable than bottle feeding. Countries such as Norway and Sweden, where breastfeeding in public places is accepted as normal have significantly higher breastfeeding rates.

UK surveys have shown:

- half of all breastfeeding women never tried to breastfeed in public during the first few weeks after the baby was born¹⁰
- Between 4 – 6 months, only 39% of women breastfed in public compared with 67% of women who bottle fed¹⁰
- Younger, more disadvantaged and non-white women are less likely to breastfeed when they are out.¹⁰
- Of mothers who had breastfed when out, 42% preferred to feed in a mother and baby room and only 8% preferred to breastfeed without going to a special place.¹⁰
- When their babies were 4-6 months old, about half (46%) of breastfeeding mothers said they had had problems finding somewhere to feed their babies in public.¹⁰
- In contrast to the NOP poll quoted above, an NCT survey in 2005 found that 63% of breastfeeding women had been subject to unsupportive comments or behaviour from other people when breastfeeding in public.² Some women choose to express milk or use formula when they are planning to be out of the house, rather than risk discrimination.
- Other factors that discourage women who breastfeed when out are concerns about hygiene (29%) and lack confidence (25%)¹⁰

¹ NOP survey conducted on behalf of the Department of Health between 24-26 January 2003 amongst 990 people

² A total of 2661 women out of a sample of 4246 women who had breastfed.

- Women in Scotland were more likely to breastfeed in public and to be comfortable doing so, compared with women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This difference can be attributed to the change in law in Scotland.¹⁰

Although the legal rights are now clearer, and breastfeeding mothers are protected from discrimination under the law, there is still a need to let mothers know about their rights and where they will be welcome to breastfeed. There are Breastfeeding Welcome schemes in Wales and Northern Ireland. The Breastfeeding Manifesto Coalition is working on a Breastfeeding Welcome scheme with is gathering support across the country.

References and further sources of information:

For further information about the NCT Baby Feeding Campaigns see:

www.nct.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/campaigning/breastfeeding

Breastfeeding Manifesto scheme www.breastfeedingwelcomescheme.org.uk

In Northern Ireland see www.breastfedbabies.org

In Wales see wales.gov.uk/topics/health/improvement/pregnancy/breastfeeding

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The NCT wants all parents to have an experience of pregnancy, birth and early parenthood that enriches their lives and gives them confidence in being a parent.

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