

Supporting Breastfeeding: Your actions matter, even if you are not a parent

Canadian Breastfeeding Week is from October 1 to 7, 2019 and this year's slogan is: Empower Parents, Enable Breastfeeding. By now, many of us know of the health-promoting qualities of breast milk and how it contributes to lifelong [infant health](#), in addition to [maternal health](#). In Canada, the majority of women initiate breastfeeding (90%), but only about 25% are able to continue with exclusive breastfeeding for the recommended duration of [6 months](#). Perhaps more importantly, many women do not meet their own [breastfeeding goals](#) - signifying that many mothers may be left disappointed with their breastfeeding experience. Although barriers to breastfeeding may include physiological problems (e.g. low milk supply) there are also social barriers, such as poor social support for women who are breastfeeding and the view that breastfeeding in public is inappropriate. To help breakdown these social barriers, we all must contribute to creating spaces where mothers feel supported and empowered to breastfeed.

A common approach to promoting breastfeeding is to educate mothers about all the benefits to her infant. However, from many other examples of behaviour change, we know this approach is rarely effective. Does your doctor telling you to eat more vegetables and going to the gym help you to actually do those behaviours? Not often. There is a big difference between educating someone about a behaviour and providing the environment and support for them to successfully accomplish it. It is important that we think beyond the individual themselves (in this case the breastfeeding mother) and focus on the environment and social context that helps or hinders the behaviour.

Social support is one of the most important ways we can help women to continue breastfeeding. Women are still marginalized for breastfeeding in public spaces as noted by a recent tweet from Royal Dutch Airlines informing passengers that breastfeeding is permitted on flights but that a mother may be asked to cover herself should other passengers be offended by this. This is harmful, because it identifies breastfeeding as an offensive experience and reveals our persistent public discomfort around this extremely important and unique ability of the female body.



One of the most impactful ways we can promote breastfeeding is to recognize that we need to create the social and environmental spaces where mothers feel safe and supported to feed their babies. Regardless of your parenting status, marital status, or relationships with other babies, we all can contribute to promoting a safer and more supportive environment for new mothers.

So, what can you do to empower and support breastfeeding? Here are some ideas: 1) Be aware that breastfeeding in public is a legal right in Canada and many U.S. states and do not judge a woman for her infant feeding choices. Instead, treat her with compassion and empathy, knowing that she is doing her best to grow another human being. 2) Speak up if you hear breastfeeding being discouraged in public by reminding people that taking offense to breastfeeding is not the problem of the mother, but the problem of the observer. Remind them about point 1. 3) If you provide social support to someone who is feeding an infant, be aware that just because breastfeeding is natural doesn't mean it is easy. Provide a listening ear, be empathetic, allow the mother to talk about her experiences without judging and then try to find realistic and practical solutions together. Sometimes this might be attending a breastfeeding support group, visiting a lactation consultant, pumping breastmilk or switching from breastfeeding to formula feeding.

Women carry the huge responsibility of growing the next generation (both in utero and postnatally with infant nutrition), but everyone can contribute to healthy child development by reducing social barriers that may hinder breastfeeding. Even if you are not a parent yourself, supporting a breastfeeding-friendly society is one way we can empower and enable mothers to meet their breastfeeding goals, providing babies with a foundation for lifelong health.

Sarah Turner is a PhD student in the [Azad Lab](#) at the University of Manitoba.