

# Breastfeeding may help to offset early disadvantages, researchers say

Breastfeeding may be particularly important to the educational and emotional development of children from single-parent and low-income families, new research suggests.

Previous studies have reported that the high nutritional content of breast milk can increase a baby's IQ. Other research has found that breastfed children are at an advantage because their mothers are, on average, better-off and more articulate.

However, a new study from the Institute of Education, London, which involved 1,136 mothers, strengthens the argument that breastfeeding is also associated with more positive parenting practices that can continue beyond infancy.

Researchers who analysed the behaviour of mothers reading a storybook to their one-year-old children found that, on average, those who breastfed made more effort to engage their infants in the book than mothers who bottle-fed. In general, mothers with more positive attitudes towards breastfeeding also appeared to have a warmer relationship with their babies.

The greatest differences in behaviour were between two groups of single and low-income mothers – those who breastfed for between 6 and 12 months, and those who bottle-fed. Poorer women who breastfed interacted with their babies during the book-reading exercise almost as well as more advantaged mothers did. However, low-income mothers who bottle-fed their babies tended to communicate with them much less well than other mothers, the researchers say.

Marital status had no effect on the quality of a mother's interaction with her child, provided she had breastfed for 6 to 12 months. In fact, single mothers who had breastfed for this period made slightly more effort than other mothers to explain the storybook to their child.

A repeat experiment four years later found that mothers who had been on a low income when their child was one, but had breastfed for more than six months, had a higher quality of interaction with their five-year-old than other mothers. They also made more effort to engage their child in the book-reading exercise than mothers who had not breastfed. By contrast, breastfeeding appeared to have no lasting effect on the parenting behaviours of married and higher-income mothers.

The report's principal author, Dr Leslie Gutman, research director of the Institute's Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, says that the age five findings underscore the "protective" influence of breastfeeding for lone

parent and low-income families. Future studies should investigate the processes behind the findings, she suggests. Researchers should attempt to establish, for example, whether skin-to-skin contact forms stronger bonds between breastfed infants and their mothers which, in turn, lead to more positive parenting practices.

Dr Gutman also says that the findings provide support for government policies that encourage breastfeeding, particularly for more disadvantaged mothers. "Mothers in such challenging circumstances may face more obstacles to breastfeeding, especially for a longer period of time," she points out. "They may lack role models and encouragement, or they may be under greater pressure to return to work when their child is still very young."

If a mother works on a short-term casual basis, or is an agency worker, she may not qualify for maternity leave, and if she earns less than £90 per week, on average, she does not qualify for Statutory Maternity Pay. This may act as an incentive to stop breastfeeding and return to work as soon as possible, the study says.

"New mothers, particularly in deprived communities, may therefore require more than information leaflets," the researchers comment. "Rather, interventions that offer early and ongoing support and encouragement to manage breastfeeding may be needed: this may come from financial support in order to enable a delay in return to work and/or workplace nurseries where mothers can visit and breastfeed their babies during the day. Meanwhile, campaigns such as 'Be a star', run by Blackpool Primary Care Trust (PCT) and North Lancashire Teaching PCT to provide role models for young mothers, may be a way of highlighting the issue."

The Institute of Education research, which was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, is based on a new analysis of previously unreported data that were originally collected as part of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children in the mid-1990s.

Dr Gutman and her colleagues also found that mothers with extensive social networks interacted with their infants more positively, on average, than mothers with more limited social circles. "At a community level, the finding implies that the networking and social interactions that go on between parents in children's centres, early-years settings, community groups and many other community venues, such as libraries, and health and leisure centres, are of great value," they say.

Efforts to improve maternal health could also help to build parenting capabilities as post-natal depression impairs communication between mother and child, the researchers add.

*Nurturing parenting capability: the early years*, by Leslie Gutman, John Brown and Rodie Akerman, can be downloaded from the website of the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net) from 9.30 am today.

**Further information:**

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**Notes for editors:**

1. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning was set up in 1999 by the then Department for Education and Employment and receives funding from a number of public and private bodies. Its recent research reports can be downloaded from its website [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net) The Institute of Education is a college of the University of London, specialising in teaching, research and consultancy in education and related areas of social science and professional practice.
2. The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children is an ongoing research project. To be eligible for the study, mothers not only had to be living in Avon while pregnant, their expected date of delivery had to lie between April 1, 1991 and December 31, 1992, inclusive. The observational measure of parenting that was used – the Thorpe Interaction Measure – examines both the warmth of the mother towards her child and her teaching behaviours when asked to read with her child.
3. The most recent Infant Feeding Survey, conducted in 2005, indicates that mothers in England are more likely to breastfeed than mothers in other UK countries. The initial breastfeeding rates were 78 per cent in England, 70 per cent in Scotland, 67 per cent in Wales, and 63 per cent in Northern Ireland. This fell to 48 per cent of all mothers in the UK by the time the baby was six weeks old, and 25 per cent at six months. Prevalence of breastfeeding was highest among mothers from managerial and professional occupations, those with the highest education levels, those aged 30 or over, and those from minority ethnic groups.