



Insights from fathers in Ireland on their ability to support their breastfeeding partner

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Ireland has not had a breastfeeding culture for several generations, and currently has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates worldwide⁽¹⁾. Women in Ireland often discontinue breastfeeding due to technical difficulties and inadequate practical and emotional support⁽²⁾. With hospital stays becoming shorter, adequate support for breastfeeding mothers, particularly in the early post-partum period, is crucial⁽³⁾. A woman's partner can provide a continuity of care which no healthcare professional can offer, and as such, educating fathers on how to adequately support their breastfeeding partner may be an important element of successful breastfeeding promotion. However, despite the potentially positive impact of fathers on the feeding process^(4,5), little attention has been given to the role of a father in breastfeeding in Ireland⁽⁶⁾. As such, this study aimed to gain insight into the paternal understanding of the breastfeeding process in Ireland.

A survey with open and closed questions was posted to 1,398 men with an Irish partner who had given birth 4–7 months previously in the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital. Fathers who specified that their partner breastfed their last or only child were questioned about their: influence on the breastfeeding decision; ability to assist with breastfeeding challenges; and perceived advantages and disadvantages to breastfeeding. Content analysis was used to analyse the answers to open questions, and due to the number of surveys received, the themes developed from this analysis were quantitatively counted.

Most of the 583 respondents to the survey (42% response rate) were employed (94.9%, *n*553), college-educated (69.3%, *n*404) and married (85.6%, *n*499). The majority (71.5%, *n*417) had a partner who initiated breastfeeding. Approximately half (54.9%, *n*229) of fathers encouraged breastfeeding when the decision to breastfeed was being made. Despite this, the majority (77.5%, *n*323) of fathers were unprepared for at least one aspect of breastfeeding, most commonly that their partner experienced pain and difficulty on feeding. Almost half (49.4%, *n*117) of fathers with a partner who experienced breastfeeding challenges did not have enough information to help her to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, whilst the majority (86.8%, *n*362) of fathers listed benefits to having a breastfeeding partner, a significant minority (41.0%, *n*133) expressed concern about reduced father-infant bonding opportunities due to breastfeeding.

Studies have shown that practical support from fathers generally has a positive impact on some aspect of breastfeeding, whether it is initiation⁽²⁾, feeding on discharge⁽²⁾, duration⁽³⁾, or coping with breastfeeding difficulties⁽³⁾. However, data from this study indicate that fathers often lack the knowledge required to provide helpful and practical breastfeeding support. In order for fathers to become competent breastfeeding supports, it is important that healthcare professionals identify opportunities in which they can educate and prepare fathers for their valuable role in breastfeeding.

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