

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Does stream of education affect the knowledge and attitude regarding breastfeeding among adolescent students?

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Abstract	Introduction	Methodology	Results	Conclusion	References	Citation	Tables / Figures
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Abstract

Background: The benefits of breastfeeding are accepted universally. Inadequate knowledge, or unfavourable attitude, affects future perception of women toward breastfeeding during adolescence. **Aims & Objectives:** (1) To compare the knowledge and attitude regarding breastfeeding among fresh graduates (science versus other streams) and (2) To analyse the syllabus of breastfeeding-related topics during formal education in schools. **Material & Methods:** This cross-sectional study was conducted among teenage college students (n = 187) in Chandigarh. Knowledge and attitude of students from science versus other (arts and commerce) streams about breastfeeding were assessed using a questionnaire. The authors also analysed the syllabus of science. Descriptive statistical analysis was done by SPSS(V-16). Item wise chi- square test was applied. **Results:** Almost all students knew the benefits of breastfeeding irrespective of the stream. Some knowledge gaps were noticed. Majority (69.2%) from others stream considered breast milk as unhygienic. Some (30.8%) of them believed that small breasts produce insufficient milk. Science stream students (63.4%) were more confident about their future breastfeeding. Most of the other group students (96.2%) did not know the preventive role of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding topic is inadequately discussed in schools. **Conclusion:** Students from science stream had better knowledge and favourable attitude toward breastfeeding.

Keywords

Breastfeeding; Knowledge; Attitude; Adolescents

Introduction

The benefits of breastfeeding are accepted universally (1,2,3). Breastfeeding has a preventive role. (3–6). In children, it reduces the risk of infections. In mothers, it prevents ovarian and breast cancers (7,8).

The decision by a woman to breastfeed her child after childbirth is influenced by many factors such as

ethnicity, culture and education (9). Our health-related behaviour and practices are based on what we learn in schools. So school education also has an important role to play in shaping the mind set of adolescent girls toward breastfeeding (9). Many studies have revealed that parental education is also positively associated with breastfeeding (10,11). In India, school education has several levels, namely, primary level (I–V), middle level (VI–VIII), secondary

level (IX–X), and senior secondary level (XI and XII). (12) Thereafter, graduation is pursued by the students usually at 18 years of age. Incidentally, this is the cut-off legal age for marriage. Thus, the girl respondents in this study were legally eligible for marriage. So, it becomes all the more relevant and important to gauge their views, beliefs, and attitudes toward breastfeeding, because they are soon-to-be-mother cohort. Hence, this study was conducted with the following objectives.

Aims & Objectives

1. To compare the knowledge and attitude regarding breastfeeding among science and other group first-year graduate students.
2. To analyse the syllabus pertaining to breastfeeding-related topics of class I–XII students.

Material & Methods

It was a cross-sectional study. The School of Public Health, PGIMER, Chandigarh, India, celebrated World Breast Feeding Week in an Urban Government Girls College in Chandigarh in 2015. The team members included faculty and resident doctors. The authors utilized the opportunity to gather data, so that they could plan an education strategy for promoting breastfeeding among future mothers. The authors purposively selected 200, first-year graduate students of science and other (arts and commerce) streams. Overall, there were 1000 students. Considering the expected frequency of 15% and acceptable margin of error of 5%, the sample size came to 204. Finally, the authors considered 200 students for the study (13).

A validated/ pretested questionnaire was used to collect data. Besides demographic and biological data, it included questions addressing knowledge (difference between breast milk and bottled milk, relation between bottle-fed babies and illnesses, increase in bonding between mother and baby, prevention of a pre-pregnancy weight, etc.), attitude (attitude for breastfeeding, feeling about breastfeeding, self-control, and self-confidence about breastfeeding), and perceived advantage of breastfeeding (bonding with one's baby, health benefits of the baby, method of convenience, regaining one's figure, prevention of breast cancer, etc.).

The responses were categorized into binary variables wherever applicable. The authors also analyzed the

NCERT syllabus of science from primary to senior secondary level (class I–XII) (12,13).

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software package version 16. Individual item wise chi square test was also performed.

Results

Demographic details of the respondents are given in [Table 1](#). Of 200 students, 13 opted out (response rate- 93.5%).

Almost all the students (98.9%) knew that bottle milk was not the same as breast milk and bottle milk was harmful to the baby ([Table 2](#)). Most of them (93%) recommended exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of a baby's life. Majority of the students from other groups (69.2%) told that breastfeeding was unhygienic and could spread germs. Twenty-four other group students (30.8%) thought that small breast would not produce enough milk. Only 34 from other group students (43.6%) knew about the preventive role of breastfeeding in breast and ovarian cancers.

Most of the students, irrespective of the stream (96.7%), mentioned that they would try to breastfed if they ever had a baby ([Table 3](#)). Ninety-nine (90.8%) science students thought that it would be a pleasant feeling. Majority (62%–63%) of them felt confident about complete control over breastfeeding in future. Only 27 (34.6%) students from other groups were confident enough of breastfeeding. Some (30.8%) of them replied that they would have personal control on breastfeeding.

Almost all the students, irrespective of the stream, replied that breastfeeding would help in bonding with one's baby (96%–100%) and would benefit the baby (93.6%–98.2%). Students of both the streams also agreed that breast milk was a natural method (94.9%–97.2%) of feeding the babies.

Only 33 (30.2%) science students were confident about the role of breastfeeding in regaining the pre-pregnancy body shape. Most of the other group students (96.2%) did not know the preventive role of breastfeeding in breast cancer ([Table 4](#)). Most of the other group students (91%) perceived that they would feel embarrassed while breastfeeding. Sixty-eight other group students (87.2%) perceived that it would be uncomfortable and painful. Item wise chi square test was applied. Out of 13 knowledge items, no significant difference was observed in 8 questions among science and others stream students. Where as in 5 items there was significant difference in

knowledge regarding breast feeding (p -value < 0.05) was observed, i.e. science students had more knowledge than other students. Similarly, out of 4 attitude items, in all 4 items, there was significant difference in attitude was found among (p value < 0.05) science vs others students. Science students had more favourable attitude towards breastfeeding than their counterparts.

Regarding perceived advantage of breast feeding, among 11 items, only in 4 items it was found significant difference (regaining one's figure, feeling of embarrassment, prevention of breast cancer and breastfeeding is painful) was present among science and other students. However most of the students perceived that breast feeding was advantageous, irrespective of stream of education.

Analysis of NCERT books of class I–XII revealed that sexual reproduction and endocrine system in animals, secondary sexual characters, reproductive health (nothing about breastfeeding) and internal and external fertilization topics are included in the middle level of the school syllabus. Diseases such as typhoid, diarrhea, malaria, hepatitis, rabies, AIDS, TB, and polio and pulse polio programme and its etiology and prevention are discussed in class X. After class X, the stream divides into science, arts, and commerce (12,14)

Discussion

As one of the six major institutions in our life, education seeks to prepare the children as responsible members of the society for leading a productive life. For females, in every society, childbearing and childrearing are biologically and socially ascribed roles (social scripting) (15). Breastfeeding is one major component of child care. Because breastfeeding has implications on child survival, most societies would desire that their infants are breastfed. For this, we need to prepare the girls psychologically and attitudinally from an early age. Otherwise, inadequate knowledge, or unfavorable attitude, about breastfeeding at school-going stages may lead to its being disfavored by them (15).

Our knowledge, beliefs/attitudes, social, and cultural norms about various aspects of our life (including health) are formed and concretized in childhood. So, schools can also play a prominent role in developing knowledge and attitudes about behaviours that affect health through formal education. Cultivation of a social milieu that supports health-promoting

behaviour at an early age, not just book learning, is an ever more significant aspect of school health education (i.e. informal education) (16).

Apart from the above-mentioned formal mechanisms, usually the girls are informally sensitized about breastfeeding in their routine life (a) when they see their aunts breastfeeding (subjective norms) and (b) when after marriage they give birth to a baby and are counselled by significant others (i.e. family members, mothers, and sisters), peer groups about breastfeeding (17).

Another formal mechanism of advocacy for breastfeeding is through health education by healthcare workers, community health workers, or doctors, when they come in contact with health services (17).

The authors' findings suggest that science stream students had better knowledge and favourable attitude about breastfeeding than their other counterparts. They observed some definite knowledge gaps in the other group students not knowing the benefits of breastfeeding to the mother (i.e. prevention from breast and ovarian cancers). Many of them were not sure about mothers returning to the pre-pregnancy weight after breastfeeding. Many of the other group students considered breastfeeding as unhygienic and that it could spread germs. They also harboured myths such as small breasts will not produce sufficient milk. Science students were more confident to have control over breastfeeding when they become mothers. Still many of them apprehended association of breastfeeding with a feeling of embarrassment, limitation of social activity, and feeling of pain (18).

The authors found that knowledge gaps about breastfeeding still persisted among college girls, especially in other group students (future mothers). These gaps can be very well filled by the teachers in schools. Later, this (breastfeeding topic) will eventually be reinforced by doctors or community health workers with whom women come into contact at health centres, to avail antenatal services when they become pregnant (18).

Decision to breastfed can be related to the constructs of the Belief, Attitude, Subjective Norms and Enabling Factors (BASNEF) model. In this model, our beliefs, attitudes, and subjective norms can be modified by informal and formal ways. Simultaneously enabling factors can also be modified

formally (school education and health system) and informally (family, society, and media) (19–22).

Issues such as embarrassment on breastfeeding in public, perceived inadequacy of small breasts to produce sufficient milk, and possible pain related to breastfeeding were common barriers perceived by most of the students. These fears need to be dispelled through school education.

On the other hand, common perceived benefits were also reported, for example, it being economical, increased bonding with one's baby, health benefits of the baby, and prevention of breast and ovarian cancers. There is a need to reinforce their positive attitude by educating adolescents at different settings (schools, anganwadis, adolescent clinics, etc.) (23–26).

The major advantage for adopting a health promotion approach in schools is a learning experience for students as they spend a long time in this setting every day. School children are at a relatively early point in their career. This is a prime opportunity for formally influencing their health-related knowledge, belief, attitude, and behavior at a formative stage. There is a need to ensure that health teaching content of their syllabus is consistent with general life goal. Schools should deliberately formulate policies and syllabus which will complement the goals of health education.

The authors believe that imparting knowledge about breastfeeding early in class I–X science books (before division of the streams into science, arts, and commerce) wherever possible (e.g. when we are discussing human reproduction and childbirth in class VIII), in a simple way (e.g. we are discussing topics such as foods in class III, infant feeding in class IV etc.), will help the girls become more confident regarding breastfeeding/childrearing in future.

Conclusion

Graduate girl students from science stream were more sensitized, confident, and held favourable attitude in breastfeeding than their other counterparts. Imparting knowledge about breastfeeding in science stream only in the senior secondary level (depriving other group students) will not adequately help the future mothers to gain knowledge and develop a positive attitude toward breastfeeding. This study indicates that the outlook/mind set/attitude of science stream students is favourably oriented toward breastfeeding not just by “specific” related content

of the textbooks but also by the overall scientific mode of enquiry ingrained through their overall teaching. Scope of imparting knowledge about breastfeeding among adolescent students by the existing science syllabus has not been adequately harnessed. There is a definitive scope to utilize school education opportunity to help the future mothers gain basic knowledge to develop a positive attitude toward breastfeeding.

Recommendation

The authors propose that a specific breastfeeding chapter can be incorporated (in a simple way, may be giving an example of cow and calf) in the science books wherever possible (e.g. during talking about foods at class IV or discussing childbirth at class VIII) but before secondary level (class X) so that every adolescent girl irrespective of the educational stream has a basic idea about breastfeeding. Thus, increasing knowledge and developing favourable attitude toward breastfeeding may increase exclusivity of breastfeeding rates among “Future Mothers.”

Limitation of the study

Our sample size was 187 instead of calculated value 204, as some of respondent not completed the questionnaire. This aspect should be considered when findings are generalized, if at all. Composite scoring was not done it was another limitation

Relevance of the study

To gauge the views, beliefs, and attitudes of adolescent students towards breastfeeding is important because they are soon-to-be-mother cohort. In turn it will have an impact on breastfeeding rates in future.

Authors Contribution

Concept and design were made by S.B. and A.S.; data analysis was done by S.B. and A.S.; data collection was done by S.B., A.S., and K.P. The article was contributed by all the three authors

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Tables

TABLE 1 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Profiles	n (187)	%
Residence		
Urban	130	69.5
Rural	57	30.4
Family type		
Joint	60	32.0
Nuclear	127	67.9
Race		
Hindu	80	42.7
Sikh	50	26.7
Muslim	20	10.6
Others	27	14.4
Stream		
Science	109	58.2
Others	78	41.7
Mother's education		
Graduate	80	42.7
Non-graduate	107	57.2
Mother's occupation		
Working	50	26.7
Housewife	137	73.2
Monthly family income in Rs.		
<20,000	40	21.3
>20,000	147	78.6

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING WITH VARIOUS STATEMENTS ABOUT THEIR KNOWLEDGE RELATED TO BREASTFEEDING

Knowledge items	Stream	
	Others, n(%)	Science, n (%)
1. Breast milk and bottled milk are the same	2 (2.6)	0 (0)
2. Babies who are bottle-fed have more illnesses than babies who are breastfed	70 (89.7)	102 (93.6)
3. Breastfeeding helps bonding between mother and baby	77 (98.7)	105 (96.3)
4. Breastfeeding prevents a woman from returning to her pre-pregnancy weight	66 (84.6)	22 (19.4)
5. If breastfeeding, a woman cannot return to work	17 (21.8)	13 (11.9)
6. Breastfeeding is unhygienic and can spread germs	54 (69.2)	14 (12.8)
7. Small breasts will not produce enough milk	24 (30.8)	17 (15.6)
8. Breastfeeding mothers have less risk of breast and ovarian cancers	34 (43.6)	87 (79.8)
9. Breast milk contains antibodies which protect a baby from infection and strengthen his/her immune system	69 (88.5)	104 (95.4)
10. Most women make enough milk to breastfeed	56 (72.7)	64 (58.7)
11. Women who breastfeed should avoid certain foods	70 (89.7)	91 (83.5)
12. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first 6 months of a baby's life	74 (94.9)	100 (91.7)
12. Breast milk provides all the nutrients a baby needs	74 (96.1)	101 (92.7)
13. Breastfed babies have better mental development than babies fed bottled milk	75 (96.2)	97 (89)

TABLE 3 NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT PERTAINING ATTITUDE TOWARDS BREASTFEEDING

Attitude Items	Stream	
	Others, n (%)	Science, n (%)
1. I think breastfeeding a baby would make me feel pleasant.	43 (55.1)	99 (90.8)
2. It is likely that most people who are important to me would want me to breastfeed if I were to have a baby.	51 (65.4)	99 (90.8)
3. I am confident enough of breastfeed.	27 (34.6)	92 (84.4)
4. I have personal control over breastfeed if I had a baby.	24 (30.8)	92 (84.4)

TABLE 4 PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES OF BREASTFEEDING AS TOLD BY THE RESPONDENTS

Perceived advantages	Stream	
	Others, n (%)	Science, n (%)
1. Bonding with one's baby	75 (96.2)	109 (100)
2. Providing health benefits for one's baby	73 (93.6)	107 (98.2)
3. A convenient method of infant feeding	72 (92.3)	107 (98.2)
4. Regaining one's figure	50 (64.1)	33 (30.2)
5. Helping to prevent breast cancer	3 (3.8)	90 (82.6)
6. Saving money	66 (84.6)	98 (89.9)
7. A natural method of infant feeding	74 (94.9)	106 (97.2)
8 A time-consuming method of infant feeding	74 (94.9)	106 (97.2)
9. A feeling of embarrassment	71 (91)	109(58.3)
10. Limiting social activity	72 (92.3)	105 (96.6)
11. An uncomfortable and painful method of infant feeding	68 (87.2)	16 (14.7)