

London Breastfeeding Education in Schools Project

Draft report for the Department of Health (London)

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Executive Summary

This report has been commissioned by the Regional Public Health Group DH London to scope the need for a Curriculum Toolkit to promote breastfeeding amongst school aged children in London. This report aims to evaluate the rationale for implementing infant feeding education in primary and secondary schools, and make recommendations for effective educational interventions for schools in London.

Background

Breastfeeding offers a range of well documented health and social benefits for women and their infants. However, improving the initiation rates and duration of breastfeeding is problematic, particularly amongst poorer and less educated women. It has been noted that infant feeding choices are often largely based on attitudes, which develop throughout childhood and adolescence. It has therefore been suggested, by a number of researchers and commentators, that promotion of breastfeeding should occur in primary and secondary schools.

Evidence used to inform this report

Evidence from a range of sources was used in the compilation of this report. A literature review was undertaken, which identified the major health and social implications of breastfeeding. This explored the factors that determine infant feeding choices and described infant feeding practices in the UK, with specific reference to London. This noted compelling evidence for promoting breastfeeding in schools in London as a means of improving public health and tackling inequalities.

A review of the UK National Curriculum was conducted, which identified several areas of the National Curriculum in which could be used to increase infant feeding knowledge and develop positive attitudes to breastfeeding.

Consultation with healthcare professionals, teachers and voluntary groups was undertaken. There was broad agreement regarding the value of providing breastfeeding education in schools. The importance of reiterating and expanding teaching on the subject at several points in the school curriculum was identified. The view of children and young people were gathered using existing data from other original infant feeding research. This identified that children and young people are in the process of developing their ideas around infant feeding and are generally interested in exploring the issues around this subject.

A range of existing breastfeeding teaching resources was reviewed. Issues were noted regarding the content, presentation and evaluation these tools. A small number of individual learning resources were identified that might be of use when developing breastfeeding education programmes for schools.

Recommendations

Following a review of the evidence it was concluded that breastfeeding education in schools should be undertaken using a specifically designed educational resource that not only delivers learning materials for children but also background information and support for teachers. It is suggested that these materials support a cohesive programme that progresses from stage to stage, and that the resource is coherent, imaginative, engaging and participatory.

Breastfeeding education in schools can be linked to elements in the National Curriculum. This can be achieved by teaching within the Science and PSHE curricula, as well as encouraging positive re-enforcement of breastfeeding ideas in other areas of the National Curriculum and a school wide focus on providing positive breastfeeding resources.

A teaching resource should be produced in consultation with health and teaching professionals, with children and young people, and with reference to research evidence, targeting those with health inequalities who are least likely to breastfeed. It is important that any resource that is developed is piloted in a variety of schools and evaluated prior to wider dissemination.