

# The Breastfeeding Counsellor

NCT breastfeeding counsellors are all mothers who have breastfed their babies. They know how worthwhile and enjoyable breastfeeding can be, but they are also aware of the help and support that many new mothers need.

Breastfeeding isn't always easy and many mums are taken by surprise if they find that they run into difficulties. Sometimes mothers can encounter physical and practical problems. For all first time mothers breastfeeding is a new and sometimes challenging experience. NCT breastfeeding counsellors help women to overcome concerns, whether large or small, and to feel comfortable with breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding counsellors are there to listen to any mother who wants to contact them and to share her problems. Their job is to encourage mothers to talk freely about their feeding experiences and to be sensitive to the mothers' needs. All these discussions are treated strictly in confidence and the counsellor is trained to try to understand what a mother may not always be able to describe easily.

New mothers find support from all sorts of people; family, friends, health professionals. Many new families value NCT's trained breastfeeding counsellors who offer mother to mother support, information and counselling where appropriate. NCT's breastfeeding counsellors are trained to be flexible in their attitudes to baby feeding and to be positive and supportive to all mothers whether they choose to breastfeed or ultimately decide to bottlefeed. Their role is not to advise or tell a mother what to do, but to help to build a breastfeeding mum's confidence in her own ability to cope and to help her to make her own decisions with the benefit of information.

## How Breastfeeding Counsellors Can Help

Breastfeeding counsellors can help by:

- enabling a mum to consider the advantages of breastfeeding
- assisting a mum to successfully breastfeed by observing a baby's feeding position
- offering a range of solutions to difficulties so that she can decide what is best for her and her baby
- giving information to dads, who also need a chance to explore their feelings about breastfeeding
- giving support and encouragement to mums
- enabling mums to share experiences and learn from each other through open house meeting

Sometimes breastfeeding mothers or their babies may need medical attention. While the NCT's breastfeeding counsellors are not medically qualified, they are trained to know when mothers should seek professional advice and can encourage mums to establish good relationships with their local health professionals.

As well as their work with mothers in the home, NCT breastfeeding counsellors have a wide role to play within the community and often help to run local breastfeeding drop-in groups which are also staffed by midwives, health visitors and NCT volunteers, and carry out visits to local hospital postnatal wards where they can establish good working relationships with local midwives as well as acting as counsellors to new mothers.

Many breastfeeding counsellors visit baby clinics where they work in co-operation with health professionals on a voluntary basis. Often they are asked to lead discussion groups on breastfeeding in NCT and NHS antenatal classes and sometimes with school children, midwives and health visitors. They present not only the facts of breastfeeding but also a realistic picture of what it is like to breastfeed.

It is important to make clear to mums and mums-to-be that breastfeeding is not an exact science and no two mothers and no two babies are the same. It is the job of the breastfeeding counsellors to explain just how wide ranging the experience can be.

Breastfeeding counsellors work with local antenatal teachers and postnatal support co-ordinators to provide a comprehensive service to parents. Usually one session of an NCT antenatal course is devoted to breastfeeding issues and is led by a breastfeeding counsellor, although local arrangements do vary.

## **How Do I Become A Breastfeeding Counsellor?**

You will first need to approach your local branch. It is also useful to approach your nearest breastfeeding tutor, who will be responsible for training and to contact UK Office for further information.

In order to become a breastfeeding counsellor you need to:

- have breastfed your own baby
- have an interest in the subject
- be open to learning counselling skills
- be a good listener
- have a warm caring approach
- be able to empathise
- be committed to working as a breastfeeding counsellor for a minimum of three years

While counsellors need to have had the experience of breastfeeding their own baby, they do not have to be currently breastfeeding. Counsellors can be older mums or grandmothers as long as they have a special interest in breastfeeding.

The number of counsellors in each area varies. Some branches have five or six counsellors and others have none. The role is an important one, which means involvement in the whole community.

There is a very comprehensive training course for NCT breastfeeding counsellors, which can take about two years and uses a variety of methods.

Most counsellors start their training when their children are very young and they need considerable motivation to complete the course during this demanding time of their lives. The training is stimulating and rewarding with the chance to learn new skills in the safe environment of a tutorial group.

Training is run by a network of local tutors who hold regular tutorials and support trainees. Local tutors are experienced breastfeeding counsellors themselves, who have undergone further training. Breastfeeding counselling training includes reading an extensive book list and completing written assignments. In addition to participating in 'local' training, trainees attend workshops that are usually held at UK Office in London. These workshops offer the opportunity to work in larger groups and to be assessed by other tutors.

Once trained, breastfeeding counsellors have to keep their skills up to date with further reading and regular attendance at study days, usually twice a year.

NCT breastfeeding counsellors are part of a 'team'. During training they are expected to become familiar with and actively involved in their branch's activities. The branch will normally meet the costs of training. Once qualified, counsellors continue to work in close contact as a team so that they can make an effective NCT contribution within the community.

NCT breastfeeding counsellors are usually available to any health professional or mother who wants to contact them for information and support.