



The role of fathers in breastfeeding support in Hungary

Nóra Juhász¹, László Szabó^{2,3}

¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Jahn Ferenc Hospital, Budapest, Hungary

²Department of Family Care Methodology, Institute of Health Science, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary

³Heim Pál National Pediatric Institute, Budapest, Hungary

Correspondent: László Szabó, e-mail: szabo.laszlo.md@gmail.com

Abstract

Breastfeeding is essential for infants. The role of fathers is important in supporting breastfeeding.

Our aim was to describe the attitudes of Hungarian men towards breastfeeding their children and their role in supporting mothers. We conducted the research in the form of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 101 men. The number of respondents increased with age. The majority of respondents were over 35 years old, 46 people. 65.3% of the respondents were fathers with one child. The highest level of education was 57.4% with a university or college degree. 59% of fathers were exclusively breastfed and 80% of their children were exclusively breastfed. More than half of the respondents were concerned about their partner's diet, rest and problems arising during pregnancy. 91.1% of fathers are confident and enthusiastic about their role as fathers. According to the fathers' opinions, before the birth 56 people thought that breastfeeding was a fantastic thing, 28 people said that they were not interested in the topic, while after the birth this changed to 92/9 people. Unfortunately, 33.7% of the respondents, i.e. 34 people, said that they had not received any information on the subject.

To summarize, fathers want to be involved and support their partners in breastfeeding. Healthcare providers and professionals need to involve and support fathers and recognize their importance in breastfeeding.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, Fathers' role, Family care

Introduction

Breastfeeding is essential for infants in the first 6 months of life because it contributes to healthy development and growth. Worldwide, breastfeeding is believed to have health benefits for both mother and child (1), and it also plays an important role in establishing early mother-child bonding. In Hungary, for example, 39.3% of mothers exclusively breastfed their infants for the first 6 months, according to 2010 data from the National Center for Methodological Supervision (2). For breastfeeding to be successful, the mother needs proper support. This requires not only the useful professional advice of the health visitor, but also a solid supportive background, which is the most suitable person closest to the mother: the partner, life partner, husband, father.

The goal of our research is to determine the role of fathers in breastfeeding support. Fathers have a great role in facilitating breastfeeding, supporting the mother and with their involvement the father-child bond can develop earlier. There is currently no research on this topic in Hungary. International surveys explain the role of fathers, their attitudes and the information they received about breastfeeding before the birth of the child (3-5). Unfortunately, there is very little research on the role of fathers in breastfeeding. An American study investigated whether fathers recognize their role in supporting successful breastfeeding and how they can prevent and treat the most common breastfeeding problems to encourage more women to breastfeed (6). The goal of the Avery study, which was conducted in three cities in the United States, was to better understand how pregnant women

and their male partners can imagine and support breastfeeding their infants. The main strength of the study was that it was conducted in three cities with very different cultural backgrounds (5). An Australian study aimed to evaluate the impact of prenatal and postnatal education for fathers. The research identified a number of factors that influence breastfeeding, including timing of initiation, maternal education, mode of delivery, birth weight, socioeconomic status, and paternal support (7). A Pakistani study examined fathers' views on breastfeeding their infants (8). Theresa Hunter found that breastfeeding support in the early postpartum period is critical. If the mother receives physical and emotional support during this period, breastfeeding is more likely to be successful. The study examined the relationship between paternal involvement and maternal support for breastfeeding in the early postpartum period (9). A Jordanian study found that fathers play an important role in mothers' decisions about breastfeeding. The study aimed to determine fathers' attitudes and involvement in breastfeeding support in selected areas of Jordan (3).

Material and method

The research was conducted in the form of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 101 men. The questionnaire contained 42 questions, the purpose of which was to find out how important it was for the respondents how they approached breastfeeding before the birth of their child and what their opinion was now, during breastfeeding, and what information they had for successful breastfeeding. The questionnaire was divided into 4 parts: the first part was about the respondents' personal data, the second part was about pregnancy, the third part was about breastfeeding and finally, we asked them about their opinion.

Among the 101 respondents, the number of respondents increased with age. No responses were received from males under the age of 19. While 46 people were over 35, 35 people were between 30-34, 17 people were between 25-29, and 3 people were between 20-24. 65.3% of the respondents were fathers of one child, while only 15.9% could claim to live in a large family. In terms of highest educational attainment, 57.4% of respondents had a university or college degree, 26.7% had a high school diploma, 13.9% had a vocational diploma, and only 2% had a primary school education. When asked about their marital status, 70 respondents said they were married, 28 said they were in a civil partnership, and 3 said they were single. 72 people worked in a mental capacity, while the remaining 29 people classified themselves as working in a physical or other capacity.

59% of fathers had children who were fed exclusively with breast milk and 80% of children were fed with breast milk only. A detailed percentage distribution is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Feeding patterns of fathers and their children according to the fathers' memories in percentages

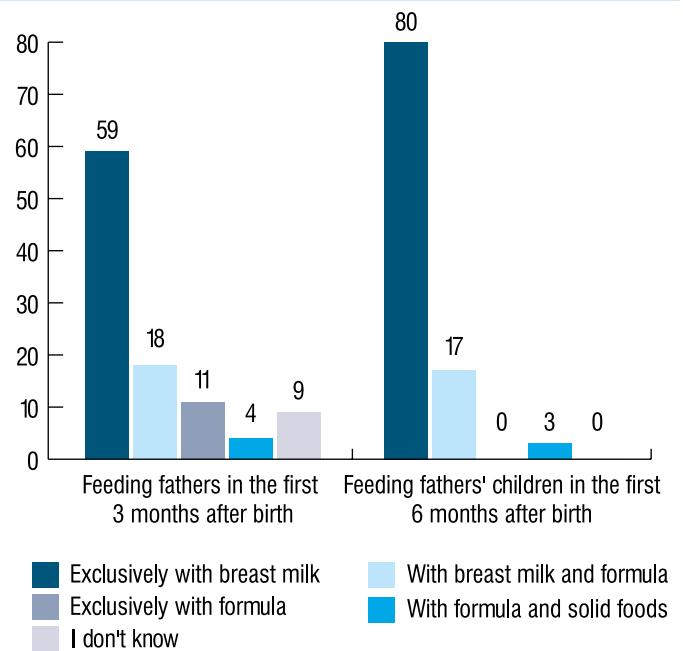
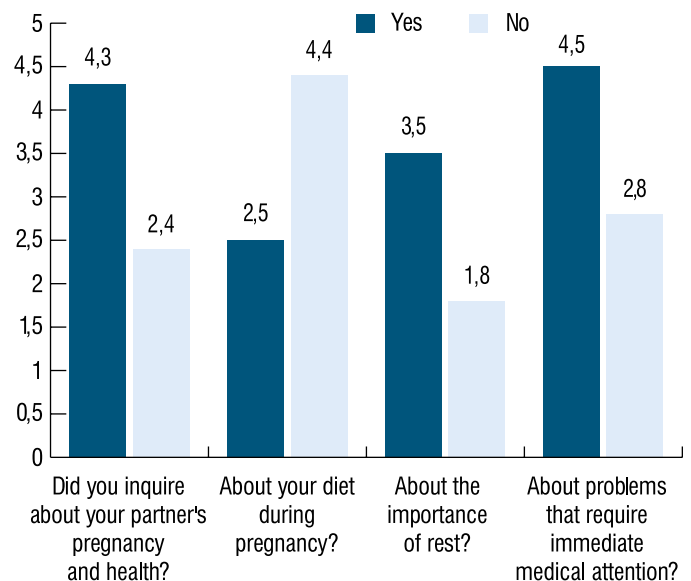


Figure 2. Distribution of fathers' interests on issues during pregnancy



The next four questions asked whether the fathers had asked the health visitor about their pregnancy and their partner's health, about diet during pregnancy, about the importance of rest, and about problems requiring immediate medical attention. More than half of the respondents were concerned about their partner's diet, rest, and problems during pregnancy. Detailed data are shown in Figure 2.

91.1% of fathers are confident and enthusiastic about their fatherhood and only 8.9% answered no to this question.

According to the opinions of the fathers, before the birth 56 people thought that breastfeeding was a fantastic thing, 28 people said that they were not interested in this topic, while after the birth it changed to 92/9 people. The detailed responses are shown in *Figure 3*.

In the next survey, we asked the fathers about their experiences with breastfeeding and their partner's support. Only 6 people said it was not important to them and they were not interested, while the remaining 95 people reported positive experiences, one of which we highlight because it beautifully summarizes the importance of breastfeeding and the difficulties it can cause. "The most beautiful thing is the bond between a mother and her child. I give all the help I can so that my wife can breastfeed when she needs to. I make sure she can feed our baby anywhere, anytime. In the first period, I was responsible for the hygienic storage of the remaining breast milk. In this way, I was able to help my wife a little, and I was able to be a part of the wonderful experience of breastfeeding".

We assessed whether they had received information about breastfeeding and support from their partner during pregnancy. Most respondents said their partner, 45 out of 68 (66%), provided information, followed by the internet (36%), antenatal classes (27%), and health workers (only 25%). Other options included obstetricians (14%), pregnancy magazines (5%), books (18%), family members (18%), and "other" (1%). Unfortunately, 33.7% of respondents, or 34 people, said they had not received any information on the subject.

Most fathers were able to help their partners breastfeed by providing reassurance, caring for the older child, preparing water, or doing housework. All responses were positive.

93.1% received encouragement and support from their partners to do a good job as fathers.

From a breastfeeding point of view, it is important for the mother to know several positions, because the breast empties most intensively where the baby's tongue massages the nipples and teats. We asked fathers if they knew breastfeeding positions. More than three quarters (101/87) of the respondents knew the positions, while the remaining fathers (101/14) did not know any positions.

Regarding breastfeeding, we recommend breastfeeding on demand, which basically means that the baby is put to the breast as often as he or she wants. Only 5 fathers stated that breastfeeding should be done every 3 hours, while the remaining 98 correctly believed that breastfeeding on demand was the most appropriate for the baby.

The distribution of fathers' opinions on statements related to breastfeeding and motherhood is important. Each statement was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, according to how much they agreed with the facts in the statement. The results are shown in detail in *Figure 4*.

We asked respondents to help me with any additional comments or opinions. Overall, we received positive feedback, although some mentioned the incompetence

Figure 3. Fathers' opinions on breastfeeding before and after the birth of their child

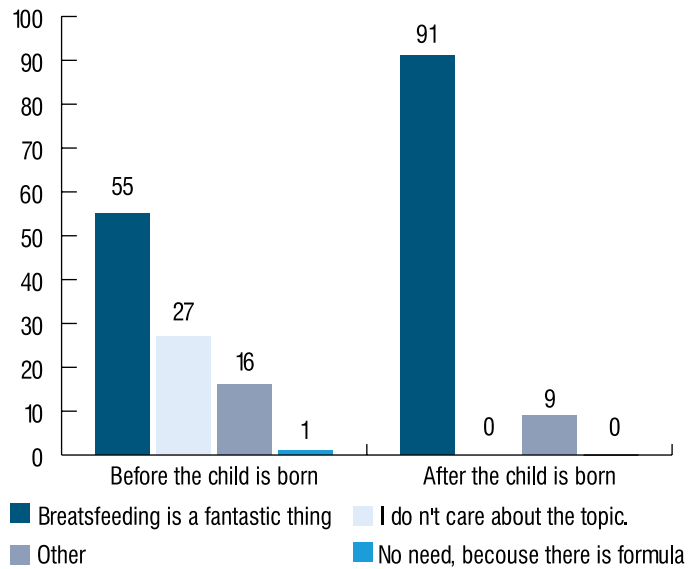
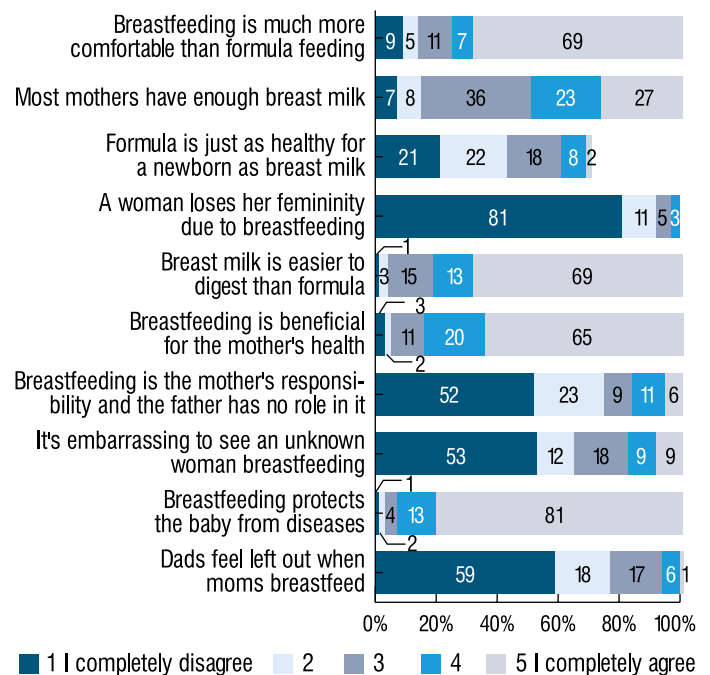


Figure 4. Distribution of fathers' opinions on statements related to breastfeeding and motherhood. Each statement could be rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being less true and 5 being completely true. How much do you agree with the following statements? n: 101



of health workers in breastfeeding and the importance of breastfeeding counsellors. We received 14 responses, some of which we would like to share.

"Breastfeeding is a fantastic thing!"

"They put too much emphasis on breastfeeding, creating a sense of guilt in mothers who cannot or will not breastfeed. Breastfeeding in public is an outrage. It is a private matter

that belongs to the mother and her baby. Especially not in a restaurant where you can eat and relax.

“Breastfeeding is very important and it would be good if every woman thought this way and did everything in her power to make it a success.”

“Don’t give up too soon, you have to try breastfeeding, it’s worth every minute!”

“A lactation consultant should be sent to the newborn and the mother, not a nitpicking, paper-filling, old, burned-out nurse.”

“The mother should be helped with everything except breastfeeding.”

Discussion

Several studies from around the world have shown that fathers play an important role in the initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding. Some studies highlight fathers’ positive attitudes (5) and some negative attitudes (10) towards breastfeeding in public. There is also a study that found that mothers’ opinions are closely linked to those of their partners (11), which characterizes all studies in highlighting the fact that fathers play a crucial role in breastfeeding and supporting mothers.

Fathers’ experience of breastfeeding support is important worldwide. In many countries, including Hungary and, for example, the United Kingdom (4), breastfeeding and breastfeeding support are highly valued. Increasing breastfeeding rates is a strategic priority in the UK and it is important to understand the factors that promote and support this. Our research suggests that Hungarian fathers have a similar opinion to the findings of *David and Brown* (4), who found that 94% of them had a positive opinion of breastfeeding. In the British study the figure was 91%. However, few of them talked about their feelings. This may be due to their lack of professional knowledge and only seeing the positive effects of breastfeeding on their child and partner, or it may be that the topic was not important to them or they did not have the time to elaborate. In *David and Brown’s* study, however, 9% of respondents had conflicting thoughts about how their child should be fed. Many of them did not see much difference between breastfeeding and formula feeding, while others said it was not their decision and therefore they had no say in the matter (4).

In addition to positive attitudes, we were curious in our research where fathers got most of their information about breastfeeding while their partner was still pregnant. They cited their partner as their main source of information, followed by the Internet, then childbirth classes and health workers. In the UK study (4), respondents also ranked their partner and talking to them first. The Internet was then chosen as a source, while only a few fathers mentioned health professionals. Unfortunately, there were a few fathers who needed more information about breastfeeding but did not have access to it. Hungarian

fathers missed practical and professional information the most. – “How to avoid difficulties”. – “About the baby’s weight loss in the first days”. – “Why does breastfeeding hurt my wife so much at the beginning?” – “About increasing the milk supply...” – “After giving birth, this would be the most important thing, apart from rest”. On the other hand, mothers in the UK study (4) wanted to know that breastfeeding was not always as easy as they had been led to believe. – “I thought it would be easy. They told us it was best for the baby, so I didn’t expect any problems and then I felt helpless”. – One thing I didn’t realize at the time was that the constant feeding was only for a short time. It passed. We kind of forgot about it, but it didn’t feel that way at the time. If I’d known or thought about it, I probably would have been more supportive.

Breastfeeding support is not only one of the most important roles of fathers, but it also affects the factors influencing breastfeeding practices in both Hungary and Indonesia (12). It can be concluded that fathers’ breastfeeding support includes participation in deciding on the feeding method of the child, then in infant care and household chores, in addition to fulfilling the role of provider and protector of the family. The characteristics of parental roles may be barriers that make fathers reluctant to support breastfeeding. In addition, the quality of the relationship, parental knowledge and attitudes are important. According to our research, Hungarian fathers show a higher proportion of interest in their partner’s pregnancy and health compared to the results of *Februhartanty et al.* (12). The questions asked whether they had consulted a health professional about their wife’s pregnancy and health, about nutrition during pregnancy, about the importance of rest, and about problems requiring immediate medical attention. More than half of the respondents considered it important to get information about nutrition, rest, and urgent problems. While 10% fewer people were interested in the process of pregnancy itself compared to the Indonesian data. In contrast, less than half of the respondents in the *Februhartanty et al.* study responded positively to the questions asked. The study showed that fathers who were over thirty years old and had higher education were more likely to inquire about their wife’s pregnancy (12).

In the case of Hungarian fathers over thirty (101/81), positive responses were equally common among those with lower (27/13) and higher (27/14) education. It is also interesting that only 27 out of 81 were interested. This result may be due to the fact that fathers over 30 have more than one child and have learned all the important information about pregnancy during their first pregnancy.

Breastfeeding is a very important factor in the early life of infants and fathers play a crucial role in making this process successful. One area of our research was created to determine the attitudes and involvement of fathers in the breastfeeding process in Hungary. This survey was also conducted in Northern Jordan. The fathers had to rate the questions on a scale of 1 to 5 according to how much they agreed with the statement. 1 meant that they

completely disagreed with the statement, 5 meant that they completely agreed. The results were then averaged and reported (*Figure 4*), as in the Jordanian study (3).

The results show that the majority of fathers have a negative attitude towards breastfeeding (81.3%, n=161) (3). This attitude may be due to religious beliefs (95% Muslim, 4% Christian, 1% other) (13). Furthermore, women are legally entitled to the same rights as men, although this is implemented differently due to culture and tradition. The lowest score was for breastfeeding in public. In Jordan, the average score was 2.17, while in Hungary it was 3.9, which is a very positive result. Several research results have shown similar data (10, 14) to the Jordanian study (3), so it can be said that breastfeeding in public is a problem worldwide.

When comparing the results obtained, some Hungarian data stand out, which are outstanding compared to the Jordanian values. According to one statement, infant formula is as healthy as breast milk, which Hungarian fathers do not agree with at all, as shown by the average score of 1.89. In contrast, Jordanian fathers agree with this statement with an average of almost 4 (3). The other statement is that breastfeeding is the mother's responsibility and the father has no role in it. The Jordanian data (3) are in line with the results of several studies (5), so they agree with this statement. In contrast, most Hungarian fathers (101/75) feel that it is their responsibility to feed their child, even if it is breastfeeding. The research looked at how fathers participate in the breastfeeding process. The Hungarian data stand out from Abu Abbas' research (3), although the results of both countries show positive participation.

Summary

Fathers want to be involved and help their partners breastfeed, but many feel powerless and left out of the process (14). More than half of fathers (101/77) do not feel that he is left out and pushed into the background when the mother is breastfeeding.

Our findings support the idea that fathers feel comfortable watching their partners breastfeed.

Nurses and health professionals should involve and support fathers and recognize their importance in breastfeeding. Our research clearly shows that fathers play a very important role in initiating, supporting and assisting breastfeeding.

Most fathers receive information about pregnancy from their partners, 93.1% of respondents were encouraged,

supported and praised by their partners for doing their jobs properly and effectively.

According to the results of our study, fathers play an important role in maternal breastfeeding. We recommend our research to all health workers, because supporting breastfeeding is one of the main parts of the profession. If the father is able to provide the same support, it is a great help to the mother. The health worker's work during pregnancy and postpartum care should not only affect the mothers, but also prepare the fathers. It is worth inviting fathers to all antenatal consultations, explaining their role in relation to the changes that affect each pregnant woman, and preparing them on how and in what ways they can help their partners. As gender roles change and fathers take on a greater role in raising and caring for their children, more books for fathers are appearing on bookstore shelves (15–17).

In 2013, an American father of two, Hector Cruz, launched his "Project: Breastfeeding" initiative, in which he photographed fathers imitating breastfeeding (*Figure 5*). He wanted to get fathers involved in supporting breastfeeding. If a father is not supportive, his partner is likely to stop breastfeeding. The photo series he created toured the United States, raising awareness of the role of fathers. (http://i.huffpost.com/gadgets/slideshows/340305/slide_340305_3498878_free.jpg)

Figure 5. Project Breastfeeding: If I could, I would



In conclusion, we can say that fathers want to participate and help their partners with breastfeeding, but many of them feel helpless and left out of the tasks, so we need to pay more attention to them and provide them with all possible help in this activity.

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