

‘Very visible, very friendly’: setting up a breastfeeding peer support project

Helen Hunter, an NCT breastfeeding counsellor based in North Yorkshire, was dismayed at the lack of basic knowledge about breastfeeding she kept encountering. She responded by setting up a breastfeeding peer support project. Here she tells Kim Thomas what was involved.

In her work as a breastfeeding counsellor in North Yorkshire, Helen Hunter has found that many women who consult her lack a basic understanding of how breastfeeding works, and that some are actively discouraged by the attitudes of their peers and family. Many women who initiate breastfeeding, says Hunter, come from families where no-one else breastfeeds, and are discouraged by relatives with comments such as, ‘You haven’t got enough milk’ or ‘You shouldn’t be feeding through the night.’

The problem is marked in areas of deprivation with related social problems. In the local army camp, some of the women are living alone while their husbands are on active service. In these vulnerable areas, rates of breastfeeding initiation are very low.

Hunter realised that peer support was probably the best way of turning the situation around: ‘I can teach as many classes as I like, run as many drop-ins, but to sit with somebody else who’s going through the same thing is what makes a difference – I know from having my own children that that’s what really helped me.’

Train the trainers

Hunter enrolled on the NCT’s ‘Train the Trainers’ course, which trains breastfeeding counsellors to provide training for peer supporters. Returning full of enthusiasm, she managed to interest some local children’s centres in the idea of having breastfeeding drop-in sessions. Because the centres lacked staff with breastfeeding expertise, they were delighted to get involved.

After her initial success running the drop-ins, Hunter suggested to one of the centres that some of the women attending the drop-ins could be trained as peer supporters and so improve the support on offer. She talked to the

children’s centre managers, showing them the evidence in favour of peer support, as well as information about a pilot breastfeeding peer support scheme that the NCT had run in Durham. The NCT offers two different models or packages of services for establishing breastfeeding peer support.¹ It took a few months to position it,’ says Hunter, ‘but eventually they decided on package B.’ It was decided to train 10 women (now 11, after extra funding was provided) as peer supporters, starting in March this year. The training will run for two hours a week, for eight weeks.

There was no difficulty in recruiting the trainees, who were all women who’d attended the drop-in sessions and then returned regularly to meet other mothers. ‘You have this core social group who come every week, and they’re ideal peer supporters,’ says Hunter. Together with the children’s centre co-ordinator, Hunter held an open afternoon where she gave a presentation on peer support, and invited anyone who was interested to stay for a quick interview. Altogether, 17 women volunteered, so some were disappointed.

Safeguarding issues

A lot of the work since then has involved attending meetings with health visitors and midwives to position the service successfully – Hunter has had to set aside a day a week for co-ordination and administration. She is on the chair of the local MSLC, which has made it easier to get access to the right people. ‘The main hiccup has been sorting out the relevant safeguarding training for the peer supporters,’ she says. ‘As there are different agencies involved, we have to come up with a joint policy that will suit everyone, and the children’s centre will have to put on an extra day of training to cover safeguarding children and

domestic violence.’

Once the peer supporters are trained, the plan is that they will attend NCT antenatal classes, NHS breastfeeding classes and young parents’ groups, introducing themselves and explaining the concept of peer support. Both the Friarage hospital in Northallerton and the James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough have agreed to let peer supporters go on the maternity wards to offer support to new mothers. As Hunter says, ‘If we can get them straight on the ward, they’re in the right place.’ Every woman on the ward who initiates breastfeeding will be approached by a peer supporter for a general chat: ‘It won’t be anything pushy. We want to have them there, very visible, very friendly.’ Hunter hopes to get some t-shirts made reading ‘NCT peer supporters’ to make them easily identifiable.

The first phase of the project will last a year, and then a decision will be made about whether to re-license the peer supporters. In the meantime, many months of hard work on Hunter’s part have paid off, and the first batch of peer supporters will begin offering their services during Breastfeeding Week in June.

References

1. Newburn, M. Breastfeeding: creating a community of support, *New Digest* 2010;(49); 13.

Train the trainers

Train the trainers is a weekend workshop where breastfeeding counsellors can find out more about peer support and peer supporter training. If you’re interested in attending, contact Linda Jackson, national co-ordinator for peer support, at jacksonwebmail@yahoo.co.uk.