

Breastfeeding Classes & Support Groups Toolkit: Best Practices for Implementation

How to Use the Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to serve as a guide for new or existing breastfeeding support groups and classes to increase knowledge and support for breastfeeding families. It offers recommendations and resources curated from successful support groups and classes in local communities.

Importance of Breastfeeding Classes and Support Groups

Breastfeeding classes play a significant role in educating families to prepare them to feed their babies, understand cues, and how to overcome common struggles with breastfeeding. **Support groups** additionally provide vital linkages to professional support while also building community with others or peers who may have similar questions and concerns. Both are important community-based supports for families to increase their knowledge, confidence, initiation, and duration of breastfeeding their baby.

Getting Started

Purpose and Target Audience

- **Determine the purpose.** Support groups and classes can have several different purposes; consider if the purpose will be specifically breastfeeding and/or expanded to include other educational topics. The purpose of the group or class will help to clearly define the target audience.

- **Define the target audience.** Organizations have found success in framing breastfeeding support groups as general postpartum support groups, inclusive of all feeding methods. This can broaden the appeal and create a safe space for all mothers. Some organizations have found success in framing breastfeeding classes to also include fathers and other support partners, including grandparents.

Topics and Activities

- Incorporate a mix of breastfeeding-focused topics and general baby care discussions.
- Consider seasonal activities for families to participate in. For example, in the fall, one breastfeeding support group helps participants craft a fall decoration piece with their baby's footprint. Parents hold conversations while also crafting.
- Holding sessions as informal social hours rather than structured classes can encourage conversation and natural support networks.

Frequency

Support Groups

- Schedule weekly, two-hour sessions with a flexible “come and go” format to accommodate varying availability.
- Offer multiple time slots, including nights and weekends, to be more inclusive, particularly for working mothers. For example, one support group offers a session one Saturday morning a month in addition to meeting weekly on Tuesday mornings.

Classes

- Determine the topics covered in your class. This will help determine the number of classes you may need. Some classes may be held just once, while others may have multiple sessions.
 - Topics may include more than breastfeeding information.
- Most classes could be offered quarterly. However, each organization should consider the occurrence based on the target population size and community size

(e.g., more pregnancies or larger communities may require more frequent class offerings).

Physical and Virtual Environments

Creating a supportive and accessible environment is essential for the success of breastfeeding education and support groups, whether in-person or online. In this section, we explore how both physical and virtual spaces can be optimized to meet the diverse needs of families.

Physical Space and Logistics

When hosting an in-person breastfeeding class or support group, it's important to create an environment that is both welcoming and accessible for all participants. The following recommendations focus on ensuring comfort, privacy, and ease of access to support families during their breastfeeding journey.

If hosting a breastfeeding class or support group in person, consider the following recommendations:

Space

- **Create a relaxed and welcoming space.** Choose cozy, accessible venues (e.g., libraries, children's museums, community centers) where families frequent that feel comfortable and intimate rather than clinical.
 - Provide comfortable seating, ambient lighting, and a child-friendly setup with activities for older children, allowing mothers to bring their children without needing childcare.
- **Foster a quiet and private space.** Consider a location where there are limited distractions and more privacy for families who may not feel as comfortable breastfeeding in public.
 - If possible, choose a private room for the group or class where the door can be shut and be separate from other events happening in the building.

- Consider a two-room model. This typically consists of a large meeting space with a smaller room to offer privacy while breastfeeding. This smaller room could also be used by a second facilitator to provide more individual help.
 - If a two-room model is not possible, have an alternative space ready for participants who wish to breastfeed in private. Ideally, the space would be close enough to allow them to still hear the conversations. Some organizations have utilized a room divider to offer some privacy.
- Begin each interaction by encouraging each participant to breastfeed as needed, but also offer an alternative option. This normalizes the option to choose and lets everyone know what's available right away. This can be particularly important if partners are attending the class.

Accessibility

- **Ensure ease of access** with minimal navigation through parking lots or large buildings.
 - Select a building centrally located in the community.
 - If the building is large and there is a long walk down many hallways or upstairs to reach the group space, it may not be as accessible for families.

Technology

- **Consider the technology needs** of your group or class.
 - Consider a location that has the equipment needed and is conducive to viewing a screen.
 - Ensure the space has everything you need well in advance of starting a class. Many community meeting spaces will offer the equipment as part of reserving the room.
 - Make sure that all seats can easily see the screen and that the images are large enough to be seen from a distance.

Virtual Space and Logistics

Virtual breastfeeding support options have emerged as an alternative to in-person groups, offering flexibility and accessibility for families.

While virtual solutions come with their own challenges, they can be an effective way to reach families in rural areas or those with transportation or scheduling barriers. Virtual options can be especially beneficial when tailored to the needs of participants, combined with outreach efforts on various platforms, and supplemented by accessible in-person options where feasible.

If hosting a breastfeeding class or support group virtually, consider the following recommendations:

Virtual Classes

- **Offer pre-recorded classes.** Offering recorded content allows families to access resources at their convenience. Classes should include contact information for follow-up questions.
 - Organizations recommend recorded virtual classes with a contact follow-up option to help mitigate low live attendance.
- **Provide one-on-one virtual consultation.** Personalized, one-on-one virtual appointments are often more engaging than group settings. They allow for tailored education and direct interaction with lactation consultants.

Virtual Support Groups

- **Group Meetings:** Virtual group meetings may increase attendance and provide a flexible setting for attendees to be in their homes.
 - Virtual support group meetings may also be a helpful solution to seasonal attendance fluctuations. Successful support groups have found that in winter, in-person groups may shift to virtual meetings to maintain connection.
 - **Challenges:** Virtual group meetings often face engagement issues, such as participants turning off cameras or not contributing, and attendance fluctuations due to scheduling conflicts.

- **Social Media as Support Platforms:** Platforms like Facebook are widely used for peer-led support groups, often facilitated by lactation professionals *without meetings*. These groups encourage moms to post questions and experiences, with professionals providing guidance.
 - Organizations may use private Facebook groups that families can join and post questions or provide support to others.
 - Lactation professionals should be engaged and check in regularly to provide evidence-based answers and support to questions posed in the group.

In-Person vs. Virtual Breastfeeding Support



Advantages

- Better engagement
- Physical baby weight checks
- Stronger relationship building



In-Person



Disadvantages

- Transportation barriers
- Potential need for childcare for other children

- Removes transportation barriers
- Offers flexibility
- Serves a broader geographic area



Virtual Classes

- Technology challenges and accessibility
- Less engagement in virtual settings

- Removes transportation barriers
- Offers flexibility
- Serves a broader geographic area



Virtual Support Groups

- Not able to complete baby weight checks
- Often less organic bonding between participants
- Less engagement in virtual settings

Facilitating the Group

Team-Based Approach

- **Foster a community-driven approach.** Facilitators should act as supporters, not as lecturers, encouraging peer-to-peer sharing and support.
- **Select at least two facilitators.** Having two facilitators can enhance support: one to lead discussions, and another to manage logistics (e.g., weighing babies if necessary). A lactation professional (IBCLC recommended) should be one of the facilitators.
 - Consider a facilitator who has relatable experiences, like being a mother themselves, which can help create an empathetic, peer-supported environment alongside a lactation professional. Successful support groups have shared the importance of connecting attendees to those with lived experiences, whether it's between attendees or attendees to peer facilitators.

Peer-Led Discussions

- **Encourage group-led dialogues**, where mothers share their experiences and knowledge, supporting one another organically.
 - Many support groups had success when discussion was led by the group and facilitated by a lactation professional.
- **Facilitators should guide conversations subtly** while allowing the group to shape discussions.

Inclusivity for Support Persons

- **Encourage participation from support persons** (e.g., fathers, friends, grandparents, etc.), but consider privacy needs, particularly for those breastfeeding.
- **Prepare discussion topics or questions** that can be geared toward support persons. Examples could include how to support their partner or how to bond with the breastfed baby.

- **Ensure that the inclusivity of support persons is stated when advertising the group.** Not only will this encourage support persons to attend, but it will be informative for some who may not feel comfortable in this space.
- **Make sure to provide private spaces** for those who would prefer not to breastfeed in a group setting if there are support persons in attendance.

Services and Resources for Participants

Amenities to Consider Providing

- Refreshments and/or snacks.
- Toys or small activities for older children to keep them entertained and allow mothers to relax.
 - This avoids potential barriers of having to find additional childcare to attend the classes and support groups.
- Diaper changing stations, such as a cart with a changing pad with disinfectant wipes for between uses.
- Breastfeeding supplies and/or education materials. Some examples could include milk storage magnets, breast pads, lanolin cream, or boppy pillows for use while nursing during the support group.

Determine Services Available

Weight Checks

- Support groups and classes are great touchpoints outside of the doctor's office to do baby weight checks.
- Weight checks can be done at any time during the support group session. Some may just come for weight checks and not stay for the group session.
- Facilitators should provide a card for each baby with the date and weight in pounds and grams, which parents can take to their provider if needed or use to track weight on their own.

Nipple / Flange Sizing Support

- An organization shared that several parents discussed nipple sizing for breast pumps and many wanted help with nipple sizing, so the facilitator brought supplies for nipple sizing to the next support group session and reserved a private room.

Support with Language Barriers

- Explore options for translation services or multilingual facilitators to ensure inclusivity for non-English-speaking families.
- Identify a community partner to host classes or support groups spoken primarily in the language of those who are participating and English as a second language.

Promotion and Community Partner Engagement

Community Partnerships

- **Collaborate and co-host classes and support groups** with hospitals, clinics, and community partners, including doulas, Title V agencies, and WIC, to boost attendance and referrals.
- **Establish a presence** in community groups and partner organizations to ensure mutual referrals.
- **Establish automatic referrals or enrollment** with hospitals upon discharge.
 - Several organizations have found success in auto-enrolling or auto-referring families into virtual classes or support groups (if offered), and/or adding families to the contact list for in-person classes and support groups upon discharge after a baby is born.
- **Invite other professionals** who work in the parenting space to present to the group.
 - This could be of interest to the parents involved as a unique way to experience other services. It could also be a promotional tool for other professionals who have a business in the space. Examples include a music

teacher for children, movement instructors from a local athletic center, daycare instructors, etc.

- Before implementing, please consider if this would be of interest to group members or hinder attendance.

Medical Provider Engagement

- **Meet providers face-to-face to strengthen referral relationships.** Bring promotional materials that providers could hang in the office or give to families regarding the group or class.
- **Share the benefits of educational classes and support groups to supplement doctor appointments.** Weight checks can be completed at support groups instead of at appointments. Demonstrating how the groups and classes can help reduce the workload for doctors and benefit their patients will help to gain their support.
- **Share attendance and families served with doctors and hospital leadership.** Facilitators should track attendance and families served, as well as personal stories, if permission is given, to share with doctors and hospital leadership to demonstrate the impact of the group.

Marketing Strategies

- Utilize various outreach methods to promote the class or support group. Some successful avenues include:
 - **Social Media:** Organizations have found great success in using social media to maintain visibility and reach potential new attendees.
 - **Community Networks:** Organizations have also found success spreading information about classes and support groups through community networks, especially with local healthcare providers who can share information with their patients. Warm referrals can be made through these networks.
 - **Other Options:** Consider...
 - Printed materials in community spaces, hospitals and clinics, public health, and WIC offices

- Print communications such as the local newspaper and journal
 - Tear off flyers and posters in public spaces
 - Emailing organization listservs
 - Batch texting
- Conduct continuous outreach to maintain engagement and reach new families.

Challenges and Solutions

Low Attendance

- **Consider one-on-one education opportunities.** Multiple hospitals have transitioned to one-on-one education during OB appointments instead of group classes.
 - Kossuth Regional Health Center has integrated a lactation consultant into one prenatal appointment in the third trimester to have a 20–30-minute discussion with the patient on breastfeeding and address lactation questions.
- **Successful groups take time to establish.** Building trust within the community and consistent attendance may require patience and commitment. You may even consider finding “champions” to invite their friends or family to attend.
- **Consider incentive gifts for those who attend.** If the budget allows, this could be another draw for families to attend. Some WIC agencies have done a small gift for each attendee (\$5 gift card, onesie with a breastfeeding saying, bib, etc.) while others have drawn for a larger prize (box of diapers, larger gift card, etc.).

Transportation Issues

- **Offer virtual options or assist with transportation support,** where possible, to accommodate mothers facing this barrier. Virtual classes and meetings can mitigate the need for transportation.
- **Consider multiple time offerings for in-person classes and meetings,** which can reduce barriers for families who may share vehicles.

Sustainability

- **Co-host classes and support groups** with other community organizations to share capacity. Divide up duties between organizations / group leaders to share responsibilities and lighten the workload for class and group preparations and hosting.

General Tips for Success

- Create an environment that fosters open discussions and trust.
- Understand that success may take time, as it requires building trust with the community, mothers, and healthcare providers.
- Consider utilizing resources like Postpartum Support International for funding and training opportunities to support group leaders.

For additional information and resources, please visit the [Iowa Health & Human Services Breastfeeding webpage](#).