

# Supports and Barriers: Experiences of Irish Breastfeeding Mothers

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## Abstract

WHO and UNICEF recommend that children should be breastfed up to 2 years and beyond. Despite this Ireland has abysmally low breastfeeding rates. This study examines reasons why this may be so. Using qualitative methods, five mothers were interviewed to highlight barriers and supports to breastfeeding. The results showed that formula was considered the normal option and there was no societal pressure on mothers to continue or to be successful. Fathers were seen to have an important role in support and advocacy to each mother, however, health supports were viewed as lacking or non-effective. Formula companies and their relationship with hospitals and the government were found to have a major effect on breastfeeding rates.

## Introduction

This study sets out to explore the experiences of breastfeeding women in Irish society in relation to the barriers and supports that they have encountered.



This research intends to highlight some of the areas where Ireland falls short of the recommendations set by WHO and UNICEF. The following section provides a summary of a wide selection of literature which is related to this research question.



## Method

This study takes an explorative approach, which attempts to extract data from individuals' experiences using qualitative methods. Five breastfeeding mothers were interviewed by the researcher as the aim of the research was to investigate two things: which supports are available to breast feeding mothers in Ireland, and, considering Ireland's exceptionally low breast feeding rates, which barriers exist both to potential breast feeding mothers and to the continuation of a healthy breast feeding relationship. The interview format was semi-structured in design and the interviewees were asked eleven open-ended questions on their experiences of breastfeeding to encourage depth and quality of data. These were face-to-face interviews using a digital voice recorder, which lasted approx. 40-45mins each, and occasionally prompts were used to expand on certain questions. The research was examined through thematic analysis. This form of analysis emphasizes the context of the data on 'what' was said rather than on 'how' it was said, and from this analysis, themes became apparent.

## Results

From the data, six dominant themes became evident:

- 1) The participants discussed the initial decision to breastfeed without any expectations of success or pressure to continue long term;
- 2) Mothers explored the differences relating to breastfeeding in a bottle-feeding culture;
- 3) Breastfeeding in public was considered acceptable socially although there were issues with publicly feeding an older child;
- 4) Fathers were considered by the participants as pillars of support and advocacy throughout the breastfeeding process;
- 5) Health supports were considered to be lacking and non-effective;
- 6) Formula companies and their relationships with the government and the hospitals were seen as detrimental to breastfeeding rates in Ireland.

## Discussion

There are several reasons which suggest why breastfeeding rates are low in Irish society which emerged from this study. The fact that Ireland is a bottle-feeding culture is a barrier in itself to potential breastfeeding mothers. The participants were of a generation of bottle-fed babies and there seemed to be a distance between, 'do what your mother did' and the decision to breastfeed for most of the mothers. This culture extends to promote bottle feeding as the norm through hospital and nursing staff, media and advertising of formula products. As a result mothers who do wish to breastfeed experience no societal pressure to succeed or to continue long term. The supports to help them to continue long term, the mothers found in sources such as, their partners, the internet and unofficial support groups such as La Leche League and Cuidiú.

## References

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