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Mothers find support at fair's breastfeeding coalition booth

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

It was dinnertime on a Thursday evening, but the 10 women gathered for a meeting at the Blue Bonnet Park recreation center weren't worried about feeding their families. The mothers had brought food with them — snacks for their toddlers, and breast milk for the babies. This made sense, since they were attending the monthly meeting of the Liberal Breastfeeding Friends Coalition.

The group's mission, said coordinator Elizabeth Irby, is to educate, support and motivate breastfeeding families, and to foster community support for the practice.

"Research shows that breastfeeding gives children a better start, and has lifelong benefits for both mother and babe," said Irby, who works as a nurse at the Seward County Health Department. Along with representatives from the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) nutrition program, the local branch of La Leche League and Southwest Medical Center, Irby is on a mission to get the word out about the benefits of breastfeeding.

Members at the Thursday meeting brought their babies, who nursed contentedly as the evening unfolded. Women shared reports about the success of the breastfeeding booth operated at the Five State Fair recently.



“I think it was a success,” Irby said. “We had a lot of women stop in to say they were thankful it was there.”

“People told me how wonderful it was to have this available,” said La Leche League president Elisabeth McAfee. “If you go to the fair, which a lot of mothers with young children do, there’s not anywhere you can sit down to nurse your baby. It’s hot and windy, and even if you are comfortable, personally, nursing in public, there’s really not a spot to do that.” McAfee, a nursing mother herself, said she hopes the group will maintain the booth in future years.

“Mothers will know it’s there, next year, and that makes a big difference,” she said.

Zuki Vermillion said when she worked the booth, mornings were slow. By evening, as the fair became more crowded, she welcomed more visitors to the booth.

In addition to providing a place of quiet refuge for nursing mothers and their babies, the booth aimed to increase public awareness of breastfeeding.

Joyce Gilpin, who teaches childbirth preparation classes at Southwest Medical Center, said she’s noticed a growing interest in breastfeeding.

“Women ask about it more than they used to,” she said. “A lot of them say, ‘I want to breastfeed — if I can.’”

The comment sparked intense conversation at the meeting. McAfee said she often hears new mothers worry that they “don’t have enough milk” for their babies.

“They worry they’re starving,” she said, noting that this is unlikely to happen when breastfeeding a newborn with a stomach the size of a marble. “Parents tend to worry, because they don’t really understand that a newborn baby isn’t physically capable of finishing a three-ounce bottle of formula. There’s not room in the stomach for that much liquid.”

New mothers often fret that they can’t see what looks like milk when they begin breastfeeding their newborns. That’s because the first day or so, a breastfeeding mother produces colostrum, a sticky, yellowish substance rich in immune-building nutrients, before the milk “comes in.”

“Colostrum is the perfect food for a newborn,” said McAfee. “It’s just unfamiliar to new mothers, and they worry.”

Education is a key component in successful breastfeeding, Gilpin noted, and the hospital has begun to examine ways to achieve that. Southwest Medical Center recently adopted the use of the “High 5” program, sponsored by the Kansas hospital association, for newborns and mothers.

Robin Allaman, SWMC OB nurse manager, has instituted “High 5” training for all the nurses on the floor. The five “best practices” include:

— Immediate and sustained skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby after birth.

- Giving newborn infants no food (formula) or drink (water) other than breast milk, unless medically necessary.
  
- “Rooming in” to allow mothers and their newborn infants to remain together 24 hours a day.
  
- No pacifiers or artificial nipples offered to breastfeeding infants, as this can confuse them.
  
- Providing mothers information about breastfeeding support in the community, as part of the discharge process.

To support and encourage breastfeeding, the hospital discontinued the distribution of free baby-formula sample packs. Infant formula, said WIC consultant Susan Lukwago, is mostly corn syrup.

“That’s the first ingredient,” she said. “In terms of nutrition, formula cannot come close to providing the nutrition available in breast milk. People don’t understand that, and they assume that infant formula is healthy, and that it’s just as good as breast milk. It’s not.”

“I’m thrilled that the hospital has decided not to give formula away,” said Irby. “Hopefully, mothers will give breast-feeding a try. It’s so much better for the baby, even if breastfeeding cannot be continued for a longer period of time.”

For those mothers who want to breastfeed long-term but worry about how to do so when they return to work, a breast pump can provide one solution. Mothers may mechanically pump milk and store it in bottles, so that it’s available for the baby to consume when the mother is away. The hospital has received grant money for breast milk pumps, said Gilpin.

“Those will be available for mothers to rent, so they can continue breastfeeding,” she said.

The coalition's next goal is to encourage local businesses to support breastfeeding mothers who need occasional breaks in order to pump and store their breast milk.

"This is something the law requires of businesses that employ 50 people or more, and it's not something a lot of new mothers know," said Irby.

The federal law, part of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, requires employers to work with nursing mothers for one year after the child's birth. Mothers who choose to breastfeed, and thus need to pump milk during the work day, should be allowed breaks to do so. They should not be required to pump their milk in a bathroom, the law specifies, but in a place "shielded from view and free from intrusion from coworkers and the public." Employers are not required to pay the mothers for the break time required to pump breast milk.

Though most of the mothers at the coalition meeting are able to stay at home with their children, or have a reasonable level of control over their own work hours, some have experienced the challenges of full-time work as breastfeeding mothers.

"I'm a teacher, and I kept breastfeeding when I went back to work," said Vermillion. "My principal worked with me so that I could take breaks and pump milk." She said it "took a while" to devise a system and schedule that worked well, but persistence and communication with her principal paid off. "We figured out how to make it work," she said.

Irby, who consults with many mothers who work full-time, or who are teenagers hoping to return to school, said she thinks too many new mothers give up on breastfeeding because they don't understand how important — or how possible — it can be.

"We know that babies who are breastfed grow into children who have stronger immune systems, so they aren't sick as often," she said. "In the long term, that's a plus for employers and for parents. We also know that breast milk is free, and it's not limited. It's supply and demand, so the more a baby nurses, the more milk the mother will produce."

Some mothers, noted WIC director Tiffany Krause, figure out a way to do most of their nursing

through the night, and are able to pump breast milk just once during the work day.

“It really varies depending on how you want to do it,” she said, “but I know a lot of women find a way.”

The coalition members continued to visit, as the babies fell asleep and the children played in the adjacent room. The sunlight from the rec center’s west window turned dark gold, and conversation quieted.

“I’m excited,” said Irby as the meeting wrapped up. “We’ve gotten a good start, and I know this will be something that helps the community.”

The coalition is open to nursing mothers and those who want to support breastfeeding initiatives in the community. The next meeting is set for 6 p.m. Sept. 12, at the recreation center.

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