



Review

Expectant parents' views of factors influencing infant feeding decisions in the antenatal period: A systematic review

Coralie L. Roll^{a,*}, Francine Cheater^b^a University of East Anglia, Edith Cavell Building, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom^b Promoting Community and Family Health Unit, Research, University of East Anglia, Edith Cavell Building, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the factors that influence expectant parents' infant feeding decisions in the antenatal period.**Design:** Mixed method systematic review focussing on participant views data.**Data sources:** CINAHL, Medline, Embase and PsychInfo databases were interrogated using initial keywords and then refined terms to elicit relevant studies. Reference lists were checked and hand-searching was undertaken for 2 journals ('Midwifery' and 'Social Science and Medicine') covering a 3 year time period (January 2011–March 2014). Key inclusion criteria: studies reflecting expectant parents' views of the factors influencing their infant feeding decisions in the antenatal period; Studies in the English language published after 1990, from developed countries and of qualitative, quantitative or mixed method design.**Review methods:** A narrative interpretive synthesis of the views data from studies of qualitative, quantitative and mixed method design. Data were extracted on study characteristics and parents' views, using the Social Ecological Model to support data extraction and thematic synthesis. Synthesis was influenced by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-Ordinating Centre approach to mixed method reviews.**Results:** Of the 409 studies identified through search methods, 17 studies met the inclusion criteria for the review. Thematic synthesis identified 9 themes: Bonding/Attachment; Body Image; Self Esteem/Confidence; Female Role Models; Family and Support Network; Lifestyle; Formal Information Sources; Knowledge; and Feeding in front of others/Public. The review identified a significant bias in the data towards negative factors relating to the breastfeeding decision, suggesting that infant feeding was not a choice between two feeding options, but rather a process of weighing reasons for and against breastfeeding. Findings reflected the perception of the maternal role as intrinsic to the expectant mothers' infant feeding decisions. Cultural perceptions permeated personal, familial and social influences on the decision-making process. Expectant mothers were sensitive to the way professionals attempted to support and inform them about infant feeding choices.**Conclusions:** By taking a Social Ecological perspective, we were able to explore and demonstrate the multiple influences impacting on expectant parents in the decision-making process. A better understanding of expectant parents' views and experiences in making infant feeding decisions in the prenatal and antenatal periods will inform public health policy and the coordination of service provision to support infant feeding activities.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1603591282.

E-mail addresses: c.roll@uea.ac.uk (C.L. Roll), f.cheater@uea.ac.uk (F. Cheater).

What is already known about the topic?

- There is an increasing body of knowledge suggesting that multiple socio-cultural factors influence parent's infant feeding decision-making.
- Research identifies that maternal infant feeding intentions prior to birth are closely linked to infant feeding practices following birth suggesting the importance of providing information and support antenatally.
- Evidence identifies that breastfeeding may be a protective factor which contributes to the reduction in obesity and associated chronic morbidities throughout the lifespan.

What this paper adds

- This review demonstrates that a variety of interacting factors influence parent's infant feeding decisions antenatally.
- The review identifies that significant others in the expectant parents' immediate environment are an important influence on infant feeding decisions.
- This review demonstrates that expectant parents' consideration of the breastfeeding option involves exploring positive and negative factors derived from a variety of sources in their personal and wider socio-cultural environment.

1. Introduction

Empirical evidence has provided a strong association that exclusive breastfeeding reduces infant mortality and morbidity relating to childhood disorders such as atopic eczema, acute otitis media, upper respiratory tract infections, and gastrointestinal tract infections (Duijts et al., 2010; Greer et al., 2008; Renfrew et al., 2012). Recent attention has turned to whether infant feeding choice has an implication for the development of obesity in childhood (Horta et al., 2007). Reducing obesity has become an urgent priority with International recognition of the detrimental health and economic effects of obesity on populations throughout the world (Keats and Wiggins, 2014). Evidence identifies that breastfeeding may be a protective factor which contributes to the reduction in obesity and associated chronic morbidities throughout the lifespan (Koletzko et al., 2009).

Within the UK, infant feeding has become a public health priority since the early 21st century (NICE, 2008) as a response to the Innocenti Declaration in 1990 which significantly influenced the commitment to increase breastfeeding rates internationally (WHO, 2003). In the UK there has been a steady increase in the initiation and continuation of breastfeeding, although there continues to be a reduction in the numbers of women maintaining breastfeeding at six weeks postnatally (McAndrew et al., 2012; Renfrew et al., 2005). Subsequently researchers have focussed on the consideration of factors influencing the initiation and continuation of breastfeeding in the postnatal period in order to identify ways to support mothers to breastfeed for longer (Agboado et al., 2010; Bishop et al., 2008; Sloan et al., 2006).

Nevertheless it is argued that influences on infant feeding decision-making occur pre-pregnancy and are formalised in the antenatal period. Indeed studies have identified that maternal feeding intentions prior to birth are closely linked to actual feeding practices (Donath and Amir, 2003; Scott et al., 2004). There is an increasing body of research suggesting parents are influenced by multiple sociocultural factors which interact to guide their infant feeding decisions (Barona-Vilar et al., 2009; Symon et al., 2013). To further our understanding of the underlying factors that influence parents' infant feeding decisions in the antenatal period, a mixed methods systematic review including eligible studies of qualitative, quantitative and mixed method designs was conducted with the aim of exploring the expectant parents' perspectives. Including studies of different designs was intended to widen the capture of data relevant to the aim of this review, enhance the applicability of the results and had the potential to inform policy and service developments to support mothers to breastfeed for longer.

2. Method

As a narrative interpretive synthesis no *a priori* outcomes were specified (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). Outcomes that emerged from the data reflected the broad focus of the review question and were categorised in accordance with the relevant categories of the Social Ecological Model (Fig. 1). The Social Ecological Model was employed to provide a framework for data extraction and data synthesis. Internationally the model has been utilised in breastfeeding policy development (Australian Capital Territory, 2010; Raffle et al., 2011) although is not overtly evident in UK guidance (NICE, 2008). The model considers individuals as inherently linked to, and interacting with, a complex array of 'systems' that ultimately shape their development and understanding of the world around them. These systems range from influences deriving from the individual themselves (the 'Individual' System), their immediate environment and significant others (the 'Micro' System), the wider environment including the community and health agencies (the 'Exo' system) and finally societal and cultural influences (the 'Macro' system) (Rayner and Lang, 2012). Subsequently the reported views of parents within each of the included studies were explored in the context of their relationship to these social ecological 'systems'.

Due to the differing methods employed in the included studies, synthesis of the parent views data required specific consideration. The UK Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating (EPPI) Centre's original approach, promotes parallel data extraction and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data prior to a combined synthesis. The main data is derived from Randomised Controlled Trials, supported by qualitative data (Harden et al., 2004; Thomas and Harden, 2008). However the review presented in this paper was a narrative interpretive synthesis of qualitative themes derived from parent views data from studies of varying design. Hence a combined synthesis of the whole data was undertaken immediately after parallel qualitative and quantitative data extraction from the included studies.

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