

Feeding Newborns: Inclusive Strategies to Build Empathy and Equity with Families

Feeding is a caregiving act that can bring up a wide range of emotions, including joy, contentment, guilt, worry, and frustration. Providers and clinical staff can help families practice self-compassion throughout their feeding journey by understanding the history and contexts that inform how families approach infant feeding.

Discussions around feeding choices, including breast/chest feeding, can be sensitive for families. For gender diverse and LGBTQ+ families, these discussions may bring up feelings of distress, especially for those whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth. Sensitivities can also arise from past trauma. Breast/chest feeding education has also historically excluded certain communities, especially Black, Latinx, and indigenous families. This systematic exclusion is one of many reasons for the known lack of breast/chest feeding access in certain cultural, ethnic and socio-economic groups.

All feeding methods, combined with eye contact, smiling, gentle vocalizations, and skin-to-skin snuggling, support a loving relationship with baby and help them to grow and thrive.

To foster inclusive discussions around feeding, providers can:

- 1. Recognize their own bias.**
- 2. Normalize caregiver identities.**
- 3. Explore caregiver preferences.**
- 4. Provide clear information.**
- 5. Practice active listening.**
- 6. Validate caregiver feelings.**
- 7. Provide options for support.**



Feeding Newborns: Supporting Inclusive Conversations



1 Recognize your own thoughts about infant feeding.

- Check your own biases. Be mindful, your personal preferences may not align with another family's decision.
- Take care to use language that demonstrates openness to various options.
 - "Some parents supplement breast/chest feeding with formula from the start, while others may exclusively pump or exclusively formula feed."

2 Understand and normalize caregivers' identities and family structures.

- Provide your own pronouns (e.g., she/hers) when introducing yourself and ask caregivers for their own pronouns.
- Pay attention to how the caregiver refers to their relationship with the baby (e.g., 'mother,' 'father,' 'parent,' or other word).
- Use inclusive language, like 'chestfeeding' or 'bodyfeeding'.

3 Show caregivers their preferences matter.

- Learn their thoughts about feeding their baby.
- Engage in perspective taking. How would you want your medical provider to respond to you if your decisions didn't align with their preferences?
- Use open-ended questions:
 - "What matters to you the most about feeding your baby?"
 - "What concerns do you have about feeding?"

4 Provide information on the many ways to nourish babies.

- If the baby has medical needs, be sure to describe how feeding can look different under certain medical situations:
 - "How you provide nourishment to your baby depends of factors like your preferences, the baby's development, and medical concerns."
- Use terms like "can," "if you choose," "if you are able to," to empower caregivers to make choices around their baby's feeding. These are good replacement words for "should" or "must."



5 Show you are listening.

- Use positive non-verbal communication such as eye contact, smiles, nods, facial expressions, and posture.
- Reflect and paraphrase:
 - “I’m hearing you have concerns about ____.”
 - Open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me more about that?”



6 Encourage, Validate, and Support.

- Acknowledge many parents have mixed emotions about feeding their child, and reassure them these feelings are normal.
- Give parents permission to factor their mental health and desired parenting experience into feeding decisions:
 - “Choosing a sustainable method of feeding for you also matters. Your baby benefits when you are mentally healthy. Factor in your mental wellness when making these decisions.”
- Help parents understand feeding decisions are not binding. Let them know that they can reassess if their feeding method is not working for their family.
- Use encouragement and praise to motivate caregivers to continue working toward their feeding goals.

7 Provide options for feeding support.

- Offering choices can help caregivers receive support in the ways that feel most useful:

- “Would you like to observe feedings before trying on your own?”
- “I know some people want to learn on their own and then ask for lactation guidance later, while others want coaching from the start. What would you prefer?”

