

The antenatal period is the best time to prepare families for the challenges of early parenting, including infant feeding. A structured, evidence based approach to infant feeding can empower parents, reduce anxiety, and build confidence before the emotional and physical demands of the postnatal period begin.

The benefits of breastmilk are well established. Yet, in Australia, 96% of mothers and parents initiate breastfeeding - yet by five months, fewer than 16% are still exclusively breastfeeding. They are not stopping out of choice; but due to pain, confusion, or a lack of support.

As antenatal care providers, we're in a unique position to build knowledge, confidence, and realistic expectations. Early support can prevent many of the feeding challenges that lead to distress after birth, including mental health challenges.

In fact, research shows a clear link between a lack of support and distress:

"Women who reported not receiving adequate infant feeding support were less likely to be giving any breast milk at six months... and self-reported higher levels of emotional distress and lower levels of social support." [1]

What You Can Do: The Role of Antenatal Care Providers

By opening the conversation during pregnancy, you can:

- Provide clear, evidence-based education about breastfeeding and normal newborn behaviour
- Set realistic expectations for the early postnatal period
- Identify risk factors such as prior breast surgery, hormonal conditions, or mental health challenges
- Make timely referrals to lactation or mental health support
- Collaborate with families to develop a feeding plan that reflects their values and needs

These conversations don't have to be long or complicated — but they do need to happen. Even one well-timed discussion can reduce distress, improve feeding outcomes, and support emotional wellbeing.

When families feel seen and supported before birth, they're more likely to meet their feeding goals and enter this new phase of their lives with confidence.

1. Penniston T, Reynolds K, Pierce S, Furer P, Lionberg C. Challenges, supports, and postpartum mental health symptoms among non-breastfeeding mothers. Arch Womens

Ment Health. 2021 Apr;24(2):303-312. doi: 10.1007/s00737-020-01059-3. Epub 2020 Aug 15. PMID: 32803451.