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Group urging African-American women in Durham to breastfeed

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Durham Connects

On the heels of World Breastfeeding Week, a Durham-based group is organizing a multi-staged approach to encourage African-American women to breastfeed. Physicians worldwide agree on the health and developmental benefits of breastfeeding for infants and mothers, however large segments of the U.S. population choose not to breastfeed their children or encounter barriers that prevent them from doing so. Durham's Breastfeeding Education and Support Team (BEST) for Babies Alliance was formed in 2008 to uncover the reasons why African American women in Durham may not breastfeed and to encourage them to do so. The group began by organizing focus groups with African American mothers, fathers and grandmothers. The focus groups provided an open forum for participants to discuss their feelings, opinions and cultural practices that shape their attitudes about breastfeeding.

Currently, 53 percent of African-American women initiate breastfeeding and about 25 percent are still breastfeeding six months later. That is compared to 73 percent of Caucasian women who initiate breastfeeding and 26 percent who are still breastfeeding at six months. The federal government's Healthy People 2010 goal is for 75 percent of all mothers to initiate breastfeeding, with half still breastfeeding six months later.

Kristen Bell-Hughes is a 28-year-old African-American mother who understands the conflicting pressures of whether or not to breastfeed. Hughes says the health benefits of breastfeeding were explained to her by her doctor and she wanted to try. She also liked the idea that breastfeeding was more affordable than formula. She started breastfeeding in the hospital without a problem, but quickly realized that nursing at home was more difficult. For her, breastfeeding was time consuming and not as easy as everyone described. Despite advice from a health care provider to supplement with formula early on, Hughes was determined to continue breastfeeding. In the end, using a breast pump was the easiest way for her to provide the nutritional value of breast milk and the freedom to go back to work as a 7th grade teacher. Hughes noted that while her husband and family were supportive of her efforts, many of her African American friends were not, saying they were turned off by the idea. In addition to family and peer support, Hughes feels that African American moms face larger than normal barriers to breastfeeding. "I think that the benefits of breastfeeding are not often truly explained and understood. There is also a lack of peer support and resources, such as supplies. If you don't have access to a good pump, it's easy to give up."

Hughes sister, Anjanée Bell was encouraged by her sister's perseverance and had an easy time with breastfeeding. She is still breastfeeding her daughter Heléna, who is 17 months old. Bell is an entrepreneur who owns Bellan Contemporary

Dance Theatre. “I wanted to breastfeed because I felt it was the natural and most beneficial (to my baby) and I wanted to bond with her.” But Bell understands the barriers African American women face. “I don’t think there are many role models out there,” Bell said. “It takes a lot of patience initially. I was fortunate that my daughter latched immediately. But I can only think that the process of latching can be slow and painful for some. I experienced some soreness and that can be intimidating for new mothers.” Bell cites breastfeeding as the reason she believe her daughter is rarely ill and has such a healthy attachment to her. She said as a busy career woman, she understands the appeal and convenience of bottles and formula, but she hopes more mothers will try breastfeeding and give it a chance to work.

The BEST for Babies Alliance hopes to understand the attitudes, beliefs, needs, barriers and influences such as these regarding the promotion and support of breastfeeding within the African American community in Durham. “The ultimate goal is to create a sustainable alliance that will help ensure that every individual interacting with an African American mother supports her efforts to breastfeed,” said Sue McLaurin, BEST for Babies Community Principal Investigator. “These conversations should take place from the prenatal clinic to the hospital, to the pediatrician’s office to the mom’s employer and childcare settings if she chooses to work.” To do this, McLaurin and her team have selected representatives from the community to collaborate in data collection and analysis. The BEST for Babies Alliance has wrapped up its initial focus groups and found that generally speaking, African American mothers need more support groups, workplace support and breastfeeding supplies. Father’s mentioned that to encourage breastfeeding, their families would need more free educational materials and follow-up home visits. African American Grandmothers said there was a need for more social marketing and community events to promote breastfeeding. The Alliance is considering all of these recommendations and formulating a plan for how to meet the needs of the community.

The next step for Durham’s BEST for Babies is to solidify its Alliance of individuals and organizations including representatives from government, healthcare, health insurance companies, businesses, faith-based organizations, childcare providers, educational institutions and of course, families themselves. McLaurin emphasizes, “We want breastfeeding to become natural part of our community setting – A part of the conversation when we talk about women’s health.”

Durham’s BEST for Babies Alliance is a partnership between UNC Gillings School of Public Health and The Community Health Coalition. Funded comes from the National Institute on Health. Durham’s BEST for Babies Alliance will next meet Sept. 23 at the Durham County Main Library. For information about joining the Alliance or attending the meeting, please call the Community Health Coalition at (919) 470-8680.

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