

## Best for Mother and Child?

INFORM fully acknowledges that breast milk is unquestionably the ideal first food for babies, supplying complete nutrition to meet the unique requirements of a growing infant. Yet with all the pressures of parenthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the simple fact is that for many families, bottle-feeding is often a practical decision. Over 85% of UK infants are fed formula as the main milk feed during their first year of life,<sup>1</sup> making it the predominant food source. For those mothers who do not breast-feed, infant formula is the only safe and nutritionally adequate alternative.

In a society that embraces and values informed choice, parents' decisions on infant feeding methods should be supported and respected. INFORM considers that parents should have free access to quality information on all aspects of infant care, including feeding, to allow them to make their own informed choices. There is a need for all parents to be given active support and practical guidance on infant feeding — whether they choose breast, formula or mixed-feeding.

## Restrictions on informed choice

However, against the backdrop of the Government's policy to actively promote and support breast-feeding, with pressure to improve breast-feeding rates and tight controls on the dissemination of infant formula information,<sup>2</sup> not all parents have free and easy access to quality information and support on the use of infant formula. There is also pressure from breast-feeding advocates to impose even greater restrictions in the future.

Without doubt, parents should be provided with information and support to help them understand the nutritional benefits of breast-feeding and how to feed comfortably and successfully. But parents also need access to unbiased information and support on bottle-feeding. In advocating information and support for all parents —

including those who choose to bottle-feed — INFORM's views are entirely consistent with the objectives set out by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF in their *Global Strategy for Infants and Young Children Feeding*, and adopted into UK policy. These highlight the need 'to create an environment that will enable mothers, families and other caregivers in all circumstances to make and implement informed choices about optimal feeding practices for infants and young children'. However, the situation in the UK does not engender this.

While the WHO/UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative is an invaluable positive step for improved care of mothers and newborn infants, in hospitals adopting the scheme, breast-feeding is the only option freely discussed and supported. Mothers are actively discouraged from formula-feeding unless medically indicated. For a mother to be given access to any information on formula-feeding she must request this and can only be given such information and shown how to use infant formula on a one-to-one basis in what is usually a busy maternity unit.

Currently, at best, parents are largely left to work out for themselves how to bottle feed and, at worst, bottle feeding is demonised with the risk of the mother being left feeling marginalised and guilty about her decision.

## Defining INFORM's position

There is a polarisation between health workers, policy makers and the Industry on matters of infant feeding and use of infant formula which is not conducive to the optimal support of parents feeding their babies.

INFORM believes that all parents should be given all the information and support they need to feed their baby safely. To achieve this, INFORM considers it their responsibility to facilitate wider informed discussion and debate among healthcare professionals, policy makers and the public to

encourage a more conducive and respectful environment in which optimal support can be given to all parents.

As an initial step, INFORM has developed a Position Paper which comprehensively reviews what is known about the role of infant formula in the UK, set against current knowledge of the importance of breast-feeding for infants in terms of later health. This paper provides a broad-based overview of the role of infant formula as a basis for policy and practical healthcare development. In the development of the paper, INFORM received close guidance from an independent panel of paediatric healthcare and nutrition specialists. The paper then underwent a confidential peer review by eminent experts prior to publication. Although primarily intended as a central resource for health workers and policy makers, the paper is accessible to anyone with an interest in infant feeding in the UK.

## Recommendations: more realism and better understanding

The conclusion of the Position Paper is that a more flexible, realistic and practical approach to infant feeding in the UK would benefit parents and infants. Guidance and support should be given to all new mothers in order to ensure that they understand how to successfully and safely feed their infants, whether they decide to breast-feed, use an infant formula or mixed-feed.

In the development of the INFORM Position Paper, a series of recommendations for areas of action for healthcare workers and policy makers was proposed by the independent advisory panel. INFORM will look to champion these as it works to facilitate informed discussion and debate among health professionals, UK policy makers and the public towards:

- Improving all infant feeding options
- Supporting all feeding practices in the UK
- Formulating new directions for work in this important field.

1. Infant Feeding Survey 2000, Department of Health, 13 May 2002.

2. The Government has adopted the World Health Organisation's recommendation that infants should be exclusively fed breast milk for the first 6 months of their life, while strict controls laid down by the European Commission and adopted in UK legislation in 1995 govern the composition, labelling, advertising and marketing of infant formula in the UK.

## Key Recommendations

- Establishment of an independent body to represent public interest in infant feeding with a view to providing impartial supportive information and guidance to all mothers, whether they have chosen to breast-, formula- or mixed-feed.
- Respect the decisions parents make about infant feeding and support parents fully whichever method (or methods) they use to feed their babies — provided such methods are nutritionally sound.
- Be knowledgeable about the different methods of infant feeding and the main differences in infant formula products and provide informed and impartial information to mothers.
- Recognise the potential dangers of incorrect infant feeding and monitor the amount and quality of information given to new and expectant mothers on infant feeding.
- As a required standard of care, there is a need for more support for mothers who breast-feed and to provide advice and similar support for women who choose to formula-feed from birth, particularly the larger number who do both or change in time from breast- to formula-feeding
- Engage in a systematic review of all the evidence to define more clearly the benefits of breast-feeding and the optimal duration of breast-feeding and to assess formula-feeding in a similar manner.
- Research to assess if delaying weaning until 6 months is:
  - practical (and possible) for breast- and formula-fed infants in the UK
  - harmful (particularly considering effects on nutritional status and ability to accept different tastes and textures of solids)
  - beneficial in infants who are breast-, formula- or mixed-fed.
- Research to assess if breast-fed infants need different weaning advice from bottle-fed infants (age and introduction process). It is traditional to recommend gradual introduction of solids. Is this appropriate for breast-fed infants who will need rapid solid food introduction if such foods are to contribute to micronutrient intake in a significant way at 6–7 months of age?

While openly supporting the need for improved breast-feeding rates, INFORM also encourages healthcare professionals and policymakers to establish a more responsive policy framework that can provide freedom of choice and active support for parents with regard to all methods of infant feeding.

## Adding your voice

INFORM urges everyone with an interest in infant feeding to take an objective perspective and put the needs and interests of infants and parents first.

Information on INFORM and copies of the Position Paper are available on request from INFORM or can be freely downloaded from [www.idfa.org.uk/inform](http://www.idfa.org.uk/inform)

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## Redressing the Balance

Why INFORM seeks to ensure parents can make better informed choices on how to feed their baby

## Who are we?

INFORM is an Infant and Dietetic Foods Association (IDFA) initiative on behalf of the UK infant formula manufacturers SMA Nutrition, Nutricia (Cow & Gate, Milupa) and Farley/Heinz.

Its central concerns are that all parents should have easy access to quality information on all aspects of infant feeding to allow them to make their own informed choices, and that all mothers should receive good support to help them feed their babies whether they have chosen to breast-, bottle- or mixed-feed.

INFORM's collective aim is to facilitate informed discussion and debate among health professionals, UK policy makers and the public towards:

- Improving all infant feeding options
- Supporting all feeding practices in the UK
- Formulating new directions for work in this important field.

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