

Breastfeeding in Shelters

By Samantha Miller, American Red Cross

A stay in a shelter, even a short one, can be a stressful time for all.

Mothers of young children, in particular, often have a uniquely difficult time. As shelter managers, our role is to help our clients as much as we can, so they can recover from a life-altering tragedy. One need that should be of concern when setting up a shelter is the need of a breastfeeding mother.

Importance to Mother and Child

When a baby breastfeeds, a special moment of bonding is occurring between mother and child. In this moment not only is the child receiving nutrients, both are experiencing a fundamental cognitive shift. In other words, both brains literally are being rewired. Both mother and child will experience an increase in oxytocin and other endorphins. Those chemicals create feelings of happiness, promote bonding, and help a mother to more effectively interpret her child's needs.

Recent experiments from Sweden's Karolinska Institute have found breastfeeding women to be less reactive to stress hormones and less physically tense. They also seem to be more calm and sociable when tested for these traits in comparison to non-breastfeeding mothers of similar age.

Lessening Negative Effects

In disaster situations, where stress is high and tempers can often be short, it appears that – at least for breastfeeding mothers – these negative effects can be lessened. This leads not only to a happier calmer shelter, but also to long-term benefits, as prolonged stress can

lead to both mental and physical health problems.

Infants also uniquely benefit from this special time with mom. Studies have found that babies of mothers who breastfeed often have a healthier immunity, sleep better, and are able to better process stress.

In a disaster, babies can feel the stress and trauma the same as the adult clients. However, they demonstrate this trauma in slightly different ways. Constant crying, inability to nap, compromised immunity from stress, and overall restlessness, are just some of the behaviors that parents and all those in the shelter will have to expect. However, a child who is able to spend some special time with mom in breastfeeding may be less irritable, sleep better, and be less susceptible to illness.

Designating Private Space

As shelter managers, there are several very simple things that can be done to help a woman breastfeed. The first is creating a private space. A woman who must choose between feeding her child in a public bathroom, or in an open gymnasium with everyone looking on, is an unfortunate choice many women must make when they seek refuge in a disaster shelter. A private space can help make mother and child feel more comfortable.

Designating a space can be as simple as utilizing a separate room, perhaps an unused office or even a quiet classroom, depending on your space. In shelters where separate rooms are unavailable, dividing walls can be set up to create a private area. Breastfeeding areas should be well-marked and easily accessible. Just as signs and arrows often must

be displayed proximately to help residents find their way to the bathroom or cafeteria, so too must information regarding the breastfeeding area be displayed.

Whether your breastfeeding area is a separate room or a make-shift wall, the area should have a comfortable place to sit, preferably a padded rocking chair if available. Infant-appropriate toys or pictures also can be a welcoming way to brighten up the space.

When choosing an area try to be mindful of the client's needs. A small custodial closet located far from the main shelter area, even if well-marked, will likely be too far for the client and seem unwelcoming.

Breastfeeding is normal and does not need to be shunned. If possible, try to designate an area that is near your shelter's play place for children. This allows mothers of multiple children to be close at hand for their youngest and oldest. Also, if possible, provide an area that is near (but not in) the local restroom or changing area, as junior might need a diaper change following the meal.

Shelter workers, especially those working the check-in desk, should be informed of the area, as they can be the first ones to inform any clients with infants of the space, and can help direct confused clients to its location if need be.

Conclusion

To recap, breastfeeding is an important part of life for parents and children, and it can lead to many benefits both immediately and long-term. Due to this, the needs of breastfeeding mothers and their babies should be considered, and a separate, comfortable area of the shelter should be provided. ▲