

## ***Knowledge and Attitudes of Undergraduate Nursing Students toward Breastfeeding Support and Maternal Education***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Breastfeeding is recognized globally as the optimal method of infant feeding because of its nutritional, immunological, psychological, and developmental benefits for both mother and child. Nurses play a major role in promoting breastfeeding practices and educating mothers during antenatal and postnatal periods. Undergraduate nursing students represent the future nursing workforce; therefore, their knowledge and attitudes toward breastfeeding support significantly influence maternal and child healthcare outcomes. This paper examines the knowledge levels, perceptions, and attitudes of undergraduate nursing students regarding breastfeeding support and maternal education. The study explores the importance of breastfeeding education in nursing curricula, identifies barriers that limit effective breastfeeding counseling, and evaluates factors influencing students' competencies and confidence in supporting lactating mothers. Evidence from previous studies demonstrates that although many nursing students possess favorable attitudes toward breastfeeding, significant gaps remain in practical knowledge and counseling skills. Educational interventions such as simulation-based learning, clinical exposure, workshops, and structured breastfeeding modules have shown positive effects on improving competency levels. The paper further discusses the role of nursing institutions in strengthening maternal education programs and creating evidence-based training opportunities. Improving breastfeeding-related education among nursing students is essential for*

*enhancing breastfeeding initiation, exclusivity, and continuation rates worldwide.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Breastfeeding, Nursing Students, Maternal Education, Lactation Support, Infant Nutrition, Nursing Education, Breastfeeding Counseling, Maternal Health*

## INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective public health interventions for improving neonatal survival and maternal health outcomes. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding with complementary foods up to two years and beyond. Breast milk provides complete nutrition, enhances immunity, reduces infant morbidity and mortality, and strengthens emotional bonding between mother and child.

Nurses are among the healthcare professionals who interact most frequently with mothers during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care. Their ability to educate, motivate, and support mothers greatly influences breastfeeding success. Undergraduate nursing students therefore require adequate theoretical knowledge, positive attitudes, and effective counseling skills to become competent breastfeeding advocates in clinical practice.

Despite the recognized importance of breastfeeding education, several studies have identified gaps in nursing students' understanding of lactation physiology, breastfeeding management, and maternal counseling techniques. Many students report limited clinical exposure and insufficient confidence in handling breastfeeding challenges such as poor latch, mastitis, inadequate milk supply, and maternal anxiety. Educational preparation during undergraduate nursing programs therefore plays a critical role in shaping future nurses' competencies.

Research indicates that nursing students generally demonstrate supportive attitudes toward breastfeeding, but practical knowledge and confidence levels vary depending on curriculum structure, clinical experience, cultural beliefs, and prior exposure to breastfeeding practices. Structured breastfeeding education and simulation-based training have been shown to improve both knowledge and attitudes among nursing students.

This paper explores undergraduate nursing students' knowledge and attitudes toward breastfeeding support and maternal education while highlighting educational strategies that improve competency in lactation care.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To assess the level of breastfeeding knowledge among undergraduate nursing students.
- To evaluate nursing students' attitudes toward breastfeeding support and maternal education.
- To identify factors influencing breastfeeding knowledge and attitudes.
- To examine challenges faced by nursing students in providing breastfeeding counseling.
- To suggest educational interventions for improving breastfeeding support competencies.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Breastfeeding promotion is a priority in maternal and child healthcare systems worldwide. Nurses act as educators, counselors, and advocates for breastfeeding mothers. Undergraduate nursing students must therefore receive adequate training to provide evidence-based breastfeeding support.

This study is significant because:

- It highlights gaps in breastfeeding education among nursing students.
- It emphasizes the need for practical training and maternal counseling skills.
- It contributes to curriculum development in nursing education.
- It supports initiatives aimed at improving breastfeeding rates globally.
- It strengthens maternal and infant healthcare outcomes through nursing competency enhancement.

### **CONCEPT OF BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT**

Breastfeeding support refers to the educational, emotional, and clinical assistance provided to mothers to initiate and continue breastfeeding successfully. Nursing professionals provide support through:

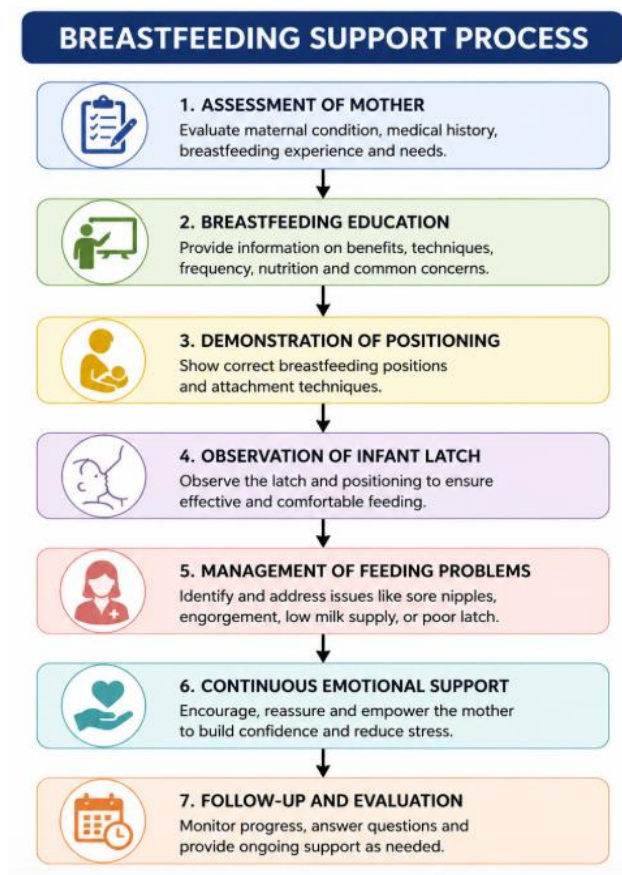
- Breastfeeding education during antenatal care
- Demonstration of proper positioning and attachment

- Counseling regarding lactation challenges
- Emotional encouragement and reassurance
- Monitoring infant feeding patterns
- Addressing myths and misconceptions

Effective breastfeeding support improves maternal confidence and reduces early discontinuation of breastfeeding.

**Table 1: Benefits of Breastfeeding**

Benefits for Infant	Benefits for Mother
Improved immunity	Reduced postpartum bleeding
Reduced infections	Lower breast cancer risk
Better cognitive development	Enhanced maternal bonding
Lower risk of allergies	Faster uterine involution
Improved digestion	Reduced ovarian cancer risk



**Figure 1: Breastfeeding Support Process**

## **ROLE OF NURSES IN MATERNAL EDUCATION**

Nurses play a critical role in maternal education by providing scientifically accurate information and individualized guidance. Their responsibilities include:

### **Antenatal Education**

- Explaining benefits of breastfeeding
- Preparing mothers for lactation
- Discussing exclusive breastfeeding recommendations
- Teaching breast care techniques

### **Postnatal Support**

- Assisting with breastfeeding initiation
- Observing infant latch and positioning
- Managing breastfeeding complications
- Encouraging skin-to-skin contact

### **Community Education**

- Conducting awareness programs
- Promoting breastfeeding-friendly environments
- Supporting public health campaigns
- Nursing students must therefore develop communication skills and cultural sensitivity to effectively educate mothers from diverse backgrounds.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS REGARDING BREASTFEEDING**

Studies reveal varying levels of breastfeeding knowledge among nursing students. While theoretical understanding is often moderate to good, practical application remains limited.

### **Knowledge Areas Commonly Assessed**

#### **Physiology of Lactation**

Students are expected to understand:

- Hormonal regulation of milk production
- Milk let-down reflex

- Composition of breast milk
- Nutritional requirements during lactation

### **Breastfeeding Techniques**

#### **Knowledge includes:**

- Correct infant positioning
- Proper attachment and latch
- Feeding frequency and duration
- Burping techniques

### **Breastfeeding Benefits**

#### **Students generally recognize benefits such as:**

- Reduced infant infections
- Enhanced immunity
- Improved maternal recovery
- Emotional bonding

### **Management of Breastfeeding Problems**

Knowledge gaps frequently occur in:

- Sore nipples
- Breast engorgement
- Mastitis
- Low milk supply
- Breastfeeding premature infants

Research findings indicate that nursing students often possess adequate theoretical knowledge but insufficient practical confidence.

### **ATTITUDES OF NURSING STUDENTS TOWARD BREASTFEEDING**

Attitude refers to an individual's beliefs, perceptions, and feelings regarding breastfeeding practices and breastfeeding support.

Positive attitudes among nursing students are important because they influence:

- Willingness to counsel mothers
- Quality of breastfeeding support
- Communication effectiveness
- Advocacy for breastfeeding promotion

Most studies report moderately positive attitudes among nursing students toward breastfeeding. However, cultural beliefs, social norms, and personal experiences can affect perceptions.

### **Factors Contributing to Positive Attitudes**

- Exposure to breastfeeding education
- Clinical placement experience
- Personal breastfeeding exposure
- Family support systems
- Observation of successful breastfeeding cases

### **Negative Attitudes and Misconceptions**

Some students may:

- Feel uncomfortable discussing breastfeeding
- Lack confidence in counseling mothers
- Hold misconceptions about formula feeding
- Experience cultural bias regarding breastfeeding in public

Educational interventions are essential for correcting misconceptions and improving professional attitudes.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING BREASTFEEDING KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES**

Several factors affect undergraduate nursing students' preparedness to provide breastfeeding support.

### **Curriculum Content**

Comprehensive breastfeeding modules improve student competency. Institutions with limited lactation education often produce graduates with inadequate breastfeeding knowledge.

### **Clinical Exposure**

Students who participate in maternity and pediatric clinical placements demonstrate higher

confidence and better practical understanding.

### **Personal Experience**

Students who have personal or family breastfeeding experiences tend to exhibit more positive attitudes and stronger knowledge levels.

### **Cultural Beliefs**

Traditional beliefs and societal attitudes toward breastfeeding influence students' perceptions and counseling approaches.

### **Simulation-Based Training**

Simulation laboratories and breastfeeding mannequins improve practical learning outcomes and clinical confidence.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY NURSING STUDENTS IN BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT**

Despite theoretical education, students encounter several difficulties during clinical practice.

### **1. Lack of Practical Experience**

Many students receive insufficient hands-on training in breastfeeding management.

### **2. Limited Confidence**

Students often hesitate to counsel mothers due to fear of giving incorrect advice.

### **3. Inadequate Curriculum Hours**

Breastfeeding education may receive limited emphasis within nursing programs.

### **4. Communication Barriers**

Language differences and cultural sensitivities may affect maternal counseling effectiveness.

### **5. Inconsistent Clinical Guidance**

Different healthcare professionals may provide conflicting breastfeeding recommendations, causing confusion among students.

## **EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE BREASTFEEDING COMPETENCY**

Improving breastfeeding education requires innovative and evidence-based teaching approaches.

**Simulation-Based Learning**

Simulation allows students to practice breastfeeding counseling and infant positioning in a controlled environment.

**Clinical Skill Workshops**

Hands-on workshops improve practical competency in:

- Latch assessment
- Milk expression
- Breastfeeding troubleshooting

**Case-Based Learning**

Clinical case discussions enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

**Interdisciplinary Education**

Collaboration with lactation consultants, pediatricians, and midwives enriches learning experiences.

**Online Learning Modules**

Digital platforms provide flexible opportunities for evidence-based breastfeeding education.

Recent studies indicate that blended learning and structured educational interventions significantly improve nursing students' breastfeeding knowledge and attitudes.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from existing literature suggest that undergraduate nursing students generally acknowledge the importance of breastfeeding support and maternal education. However, gaps remain in practical competencies and counseling confidence. Several studies report that while nursing students possess favorable attitudes toward breastfeeding, they frequently lack sufficient practical training in lactation management.

Educational exposure significantly influences students' preparedness. Clinical placements, simulation-based teaching, and case-based discussions positively impact knowledge retention and professional confidence. Studies from Taiwan and China demonstrated improvements in

students' breastfeeding attitudes and knowledge following theoretical and clinical education interventions.

The integration of breastfeeding education throughout nursing curricula is therefore essential. Nursing institutions must ensure that students receive both theoretical understanding and practical experience to effectively support mothers in real healthcare settings.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Integrate comprehensive breastfeeding modules into undergraduate nursing curricula.
- Increase clinical exposure in maternity and neonatal units.
- Conduct regular breastfeeding counseling workshops.
- Utilize simulation laboratories for practical learning.
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration in breastfeeding education.
- Encourage evidence-based breastfeeding practice among nursing students.
- Develop culturally sensitive maternal education programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Undergraduate nursing students play a vital future role in promoting breastfeeding and maternal health education. Although many nursing students demonstrate positive attitudes toward breastfeeding, significant deficiencies remain in practical knowledge, counseling skills, and confidence levels. Educational interventions including simulation-based learning, clinical placements, workshops, and evidence-based curriculum enhancement are effective strategies for improving breastfeeding competency.

Strengthening breastfeeding education within nursing programs is essential for preparing future nurses to provide effective maternal counseling and lactation support. Improved nursing competency in breastfeeding promotion contributes to higher breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates, better maternal-infant health outcomes, and enhanced public health overall.

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