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## Positive messages for undisturbed breastfeeding in public

Opinion of the National Breastfeeding Committee of 29 June 2017

The National Breastfeeding Committee at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment is tasked with supporting the development of a new breastfeeding culture. One way of doing this is to promote acceptance among the general public. The BfR initiated a research project in order to determine how public breastfeeding is perceived in Germany. On behalf of the Federal Food Ministry (BMEL), the National Breastfeeding Committee worked together with experts to draw up key messages based on the research findings designed to promote breastfeeding in public. In addition, options were explored for spreading these messages, and measures were drawn up that should be implemented by institutions and multipliers. The aim is to raise public awareness that breastfeeding is beneficial and normal. A further objective is to encourage women to nurse their child in public without any reservations whatsoever.

In the study commissioned by the BfR, around two in three surveyed mothers said that they nurse their children in public at least occasionally, and six percent reported negative experiences. The survey also showed that nearly one in two of all people living in Germany do not notice mothers breastfeeding in public. Almost one in four respondents said that breastfeeding in public did not concern them either way, and six percent said they feel uncomfortable at the sight of breastfeeding mothers.

The population survey also illustrated that the more people know about the health benefits of breastfeeding, the more positively it is viewed. In light of these findings, the Commission recommends that the three key messages "Breastfeeding is healthy", "Breastfeeding is accepted everywhere" and "Breastfeeding can't wait" be disseminated via professionally planned campaigns. These and other measures to improve acceptance of breastfeeding in public should not be planned as one-off measures but should be implemented as part of an overall concept that has yet to be developed. This process should also incorporate selected associations and multipliers in the healthcare sector.

Some women will always look for a quiet and private place to nurse their child, irrespective of acceptance levels for breastfeeding in public. To ensure that this group of women can also breastfeed outside the home without feeling uncomfortable, the additional creation of suitable breastfeeding rooms is of major benefit. A breastfeeding app and clear pictograms could ensure these nursing rooms are easy to find.

### 1 Subject matter of the report

With the aim of promoting acceptance of breastfeeding in public from a nutritional and healthcare perspective, the National Breastfeeding Committee at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) was commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) to work with national and international experts to draw up positive messages and to make suggestions for the possible dissemination of these messages.

This work was based on the findings of a research project initiated by the BfR and entitled "Organisation of focus groups and an online survey on the topic of breastfeeding in public".

The project not only interviewed women on their experiences with breastfeeding in public but also comprised an online survey of more than 1,300 people – including over three hundred mothers of small children – on acceptance of breastfeeding in public.

## 2 Result

The online survey commissioned by the BfR showed that around two in three of nursing mothers breastfeed their children in public at least occasionally. Six percent of nursing mothers reported somewhat or very negative experiences. Almost half (49 percent) of the population had not even noticed mothers breastfeeding in public during the past twelve months, while six percent of respondents said the sight of breastfeeding mothers bothered them. Over one in four respondents were ambivalent or took an unfavourable view of breastfeeding in public. There may be major potential for conflict in restaurants and cafés, as these are places where there is a discrepancy between acceptance and the breastfeeding behaviour of mothers. Overall, greater knowledge regarding the benefits of breastfeeding goes hand in hand with greater acceptance. Many nursing mothers would like more to be done to spread the word about the benefits of breastfeeding and would also welcome a greater number of clearly marked nursing-friendly locations. Contrary to expectations, the survey was unable to identify a clearly characterised group of people who are opposed to breastfeeding in public.

Accordingly, the public at large (the general population across all age groups and social strata) was identified as a target group for the development of positive messages and for measures to increase acceptance of breastfeeding. The focus is not only on the "opponents" but also on people who are ambivalent with regard to breastfeeding in public. The nursing mothers themselves were identified as a further important target group. On the one hand, the development of measures aimed to support and protect mothers' desires to breastfeed their children in public. On the other to potentially benefit from their role of "influencers" in promoting acceptance of breastfeeding in public by the way they nurse their children in public settings confidently and as a matter of course.

The health benefits of breastfeeding are generally well known, but a measurable correlation between knowledge about the benefits and higher acceptance of breastfeeding in public found in the study commissioned by the BfR suggests that spreading information about the benefits is basically a very promising strategy.

In view of this connection, the National Breastfeeding Committee has put together positive messages following the expert discussions, which can be summarised in three core messages:

- I. Breastfeeding is healthy
- II. Breastfeeding is acceptable everywhere
- III. Breastfeeding can't wait

These positive messages are equally directed at the two target groups "general population" and "nursing mothers".

Campaigns to spread these positive messages to increase acceptance of breastfeeding could be drawn up on national level or on regional level in municipalities as part of an overall concept. The positive messages could then be disseminated via a wide range of different channels in a coordinated campaign. A parallel evaluation process would be desirable to document and assess the success of these measures.

Up to date only few campaigns internationally promote breastfeeding in public, and an even smaller number have been evaluated to date. However, the findings of these evaluations suggest that campaigns are certainly a means of increasing acceptance of breastfeeding in public. Moreover, the proven connection between nursing duration and breastfeeding in public indicates that increased acceptance levels for breastfeeding in public would also result in an increase in breastfeeding rates.

According to the findings of the BfR study, additional measures aimed at the target group of nursing mothers could promote breastfeeding outside the home. The focus here is on the creation and marking of nursing rooms or breastfeeding-friendly locations. Some women will always seek out quiet and protected places to nurse their children, irrespective of the acceptance of breastfeeding in public. These women would greatly benefit from visibly and well marked breastfeeding rooms bearing clear pictograms (no nappy-changing or feeding bottle symbols). These kinds of rooms should be easy to find, via a breastfeeding app for example.

In summary, "Breastfeeding is healthy", "Breastfeeding is acceptable everywhere" and "Breastfeeding can't wait" are the three core messages that should be spread based on the findings of the expert session. What is proposed is a national or regional, professionally designed campaign to disseminate the core messages, making use of a wide range of different formats and actors (integrated mix) to promote acceptance of breastfeeding in public. In addition, more well-marked and easy-to-identify nursing rooms and breastfeeding-friendly locations should be created for mothers in the spirit of structural prevention. Overall, the provision and marking of nursing-friendly rooms are required, and the raising awareness among the general public for breastfeeding as something normal – under any circumstances.

### **3 Reasons**

#### **3.1 Campaigns in other countries to increase acceptance of breastfeeding in public**

Many efforts are being made in Germany and in other countries to promote breastfeeding among mothers, but there are only very few large-scale campaigns aimed at raising acceptance levels among the general population for breastfeeding in public and explaining that this is something that is completely normal. The following section profiles examples of such campaigns in other countries to increase acceptance of breastfeeding in public among the respective population.

In August 2002, the Australian Breastfeeding Association launched the broadly based "Breastfeeding Welcome Here" scheme with the goal of promoting social acceptance of breastfeeding in public [1, 2]. During this campaign, various locations like cafés, hairdressers or libraries were able to obtain a "Breastfeeding Welcome Here" sticker to publicly show that they welcomed breastfeeding on their premises [2]. Reporting in the media on this campaign and in newspapers/magazines as well as on radio and TV further promoted social acceptance of breastfeeding in public [1]. There were also sticker campaigns in the UK [3] and Ireland [4].

In 2013, photographer Leilani Rogers launched the "Public Breastfeeding Awareness Project" in Texas [5]. This project publishes photos of women nursing their children in public in order to portray public breastfeeding as a normal practice [5]. In the period up to 2016, over 70 more photographers from different US states, Ireland, Canada, Italy, the UK, Australia and Venezuela joined in the project [6]. The pictures taken during this project gained major attention thanks to the support of various online media [6].

One campaign that generated a strong positive echo in the public arena is a poster series initiated by two art students. The provocative "When nurture calls" online campaign was created in 2014 to support a bill in Texas designed to protect nursing mothers against discrimination [7]. The poster series shows nursing mothers in cramped public toilets with titles like "Bon appétit", "Table for two" and "Private Dining" [7].

In October 2016, a one-week campaign was launched in New Brunswick in Canada to encourage employees of local companies to wear buttons supporting breastfeeding in public [8]. The central idea of the campaign was for mothers to take photos of themselves while breastfeeding and then post the photos on various social media portals with the hashtag #BreastfeedHereNB [8, 9].

Breastfeeding in public can itself also be part of campaigns to promote the overall goal. In Mid-Michigan in the US, for example, there was a campaign from April to June 2016 called "getrealaboutbreastfeeding" aimed at combating false information and obstacles to breastfeeding, encouraging mothers to breastfeed, and establishing breastfeeding as normal within society [10]. One of the core themes of this large-scale campaign was breastfeeding in public. The campaign comprised billboards, posters, postcards, cinema commercials and posts in social media, and was underpinned by mothers' reporting on their experiences. The organisers also have plans to evaluate the campaign so that they can determine whether there have been changes in attitudes towards and perceptions of breastfeeding in public [11]. No results of this evaluation have yet been published.

"Start4Life" is a campaign initiated by Public Health England in 2009 with the aim of promoting healthy diet, feeding and exercise behaviour [12]. The campaign is designed to target pregnant women and parents of small children [12]. In 2015, the campaign was expanded to include the core theme of "breastfeeding in public" [13]. The idea was to use animated videos mirroring the experiences of mothers who breastfeed in public with the aim of reducing inhibitions about breastfeeding in public [13, 14].

Alongside larger campaigns, there are regular smaller events to promote greater acceptance of breastfeeding in public. During so-called "Nurse-Ins", as many women as possible demonstratively nurse their children in locations where individual women had previously been prohibited from doing so [15]. In 2014, for example, thousands of women across the UK demonstrated in favour of breastfeeding in public and nursed their children in the middle of the street. This demonstration was triggered by the discriminatory label given on social media channel to a woman who had been secretly photographed while breastfeeding in public [7, 16].

Right up until 2014, images of breastfeeding mothers on Facebook were still considered photos with "obscene, pornographic or sexually explicit content" and were therefore deleted in line with the site's user guidelines [17]. Numerous women protested online in groups with names like "FB vs. Breastfeeding" or "Hey Facebook! Breastfeeding is Not Obscene" [17]. Back in 2008, there had already been a campaign entitled "Virtual Breastfeeding", and the initiator says that more than 11,000 Facebook members took part, replacing their profile photo with a picture of a breastfeeding mother [18]. At the same time, around ten women gathered for a "Nurse-In" in front of the Facebook headquarters in Palo Alto to breastfeed in public [18]. The increasing public pressure prompted Facebook to reconsider its ban, and today breastfeeding is viewed as something "natural and beautiful" on the social media website.

The "#brelfie" campaign was kicked off at the beginning of 2015, where mothers take a photo of themselves breastfeeding and upload the images to Twitter and Facebook [19]. A "Brelfie"

is a play on the words “breastfeeding” and “selfie” [19]. By uploading their photos, the mothers are fighting for greater acceptance of breastfeeding in public [19] and calling for a change in attitude within society. They want people to see a female breast not only as an object of sexual desire but also as something that has important benefits in providing sustenance to small children [19]. Well-known actresses have also taken part in the #brelfie campaign [19].

### 3.2 Most important findings of the study commissioned by the BfR

The overall picture with regard to acceptance of breastfeeding in public in Germany is predominantly shaped by the depiction of negative examples in the media. Reports focus on individual cases in which women experienced discrimination when breastfeeding in public places and were asked to leave the premises. Moreover, individual surveys indicate that although “breastfeeding in public” is viewed positively or neutrally by most of the population, there is a relevant section the public – 14 or 15 percent – who disapprove of women nursing their children in public (Emnid survey in 2011 [20]; online survey of the Tagesspiegel newspaper in Berlin with 9,362 respondents, correct as of 26 Jan 2017 [21]).

The BfR commissioned a study to compare attitudes and experiences of nursing mothers with those of the general population and to identify points of reference that might help to increase acceptance levels and remove potential obstacles to breastfeeding. The study combined qualitative and quantitative methods incorporating the insights from focus groups with nursing mothers in the design of a broadly based online survey of the population ( $n = 1,003$ , age 14 and above, mean value: 43 years of age) and of mothers of children up to the age of two ( $n = 306$ ). The online survey covered breastfeeding practices and the status of knowledge regarding nursing durations and the benefits of breastfeeding. It focused primarily on attitudes towards and experiences with breastfeeding in public among young mothers and the population at large as well as perceptions of the media reports on the subject.

Among the main findings are that around two in three (65 percent) of nursing mothers breastfeed their children in public at least occasionally, and that six percent say their experiences are either on the negative side or very negative. Almost half (49 percent) of the population do not even notice when mothers breastfeed in public, while six percent of respondents are bothered by the sight. Restaurants and cafés are locations with major potential for conflict, as a relatively large percentage of the population take a critical view of this practice – despite the fact that mothers themselves cite restaurants and cafés as suitable places for breastfeeding and can hardly avoid nursing their children in such places. On the whole, knowledge of the benefits of breastfeeding correlates with greater acceptance (correlation coefficient: 0.37). In addition to calling for more to be done to publicise the benefits of breastfeeding, nursing mothers would also like to see more clearly marked nursing-friendly locations.

The findings of the study commissioned by the BfR show that explicitly negative reactions to breastfeeding in public tend to be rare – although one caveat in this respect is the lack of representativeness. Although the percentage of older people in the population is steadily growing, this group in particular is underrepresented in the study. The attitudes to breastfeeding measured in the BfR study also appear to be overly positive compared to earlier – also non-representative – surveys. The final evaluation of the data has not yet been completed.

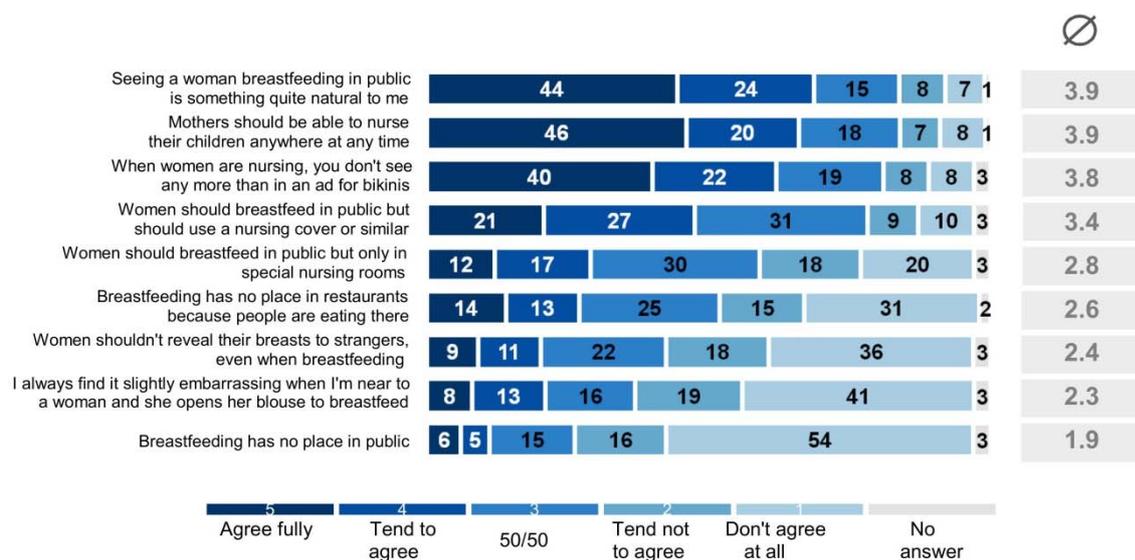
### 3.3 Identification of target groups

Ideally, the targeted groups that are defined and addressed should be made up of people who are directly involved in possible conflicts over breastfeeding in public. They are, on the one hand, the nursing mothers themselves and, on the other, those who disapprove of breastfeeding in public.

The online survey in the BfR study was unable to identify a clear-cut "group of disapprovers". Due to its small size, it would only be possible to characterise this group in further studies more accurately with a great deal of effort. As a result, the target group that was identified was the general population, without any kind of qualifications based on age, social status or region. The focus is not only the "disapprovers" but also on the group of people who are ambivalent about breastfeeding in public (see diagram).

### Attitudes towards breastfeeding in public (population)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



Population (B1); n<sub>B</sub> = 1,003; figures in percent and mean values

Focus groups and online survey - Breastfeeding in Public, BfR 10/2016



Figure: Breastfeeding in public: focus groups and online survey, BfR 2016

A further important identified target group was the nursing women. In the online survey conducted by the BfR, a not inconsiderable ten percent of participating mothers who had weaned their children off breast milk said that the problems associated with breastfeeding in public were one of the reasons they did so (alongside other mentioned reasons; multiple answers were allowed). Moreover, 14 percent of the mothers who had never breastfed said they would feel uncomfortable nursing their children in front of people they didn't know. It would therefore be important to familiarise future mothers at an early stage – during pregnancy – with the many positive aspects and the normalcy of breastfeeding including breastfeeding in public.

### 3.4 Positive messages

When trying to promote greater acceptance of breastfeeding in public, the experts recommend that the general positive aspects of breastfeeding be emphasised. The positive messages that emerged from the expert session can be assigned to three subject areas:

#### I Health

- Breastfeeding is healthy
- The best "fast food" in the world
- Only the best for children (and mothers)

#### II Normalcy

- Breastfeeding is normal, good and perfectly natural for mother and child
- Breastfeeding is possible everywhere
- Breastfeeding is acceptable everywhere
- Breastfeeding lifts your spirits
- Breastfeeding is part of life

#### III Urgency

- Breastfeeding has a calming influence
- (This) hunger can't be postponed
- This children don't have to/can't wait

## 4 Framework for action/Measures

### 4.1 Implementation options

The group of experts suggests drawing up the measures to improve acceptance of breastfeeding in public not in the form of one-off campaigns but as part of an overall concept (integrated mix). An integrated mix of this kind simultaneously launches a wide range of diverse measures in a coordinated manner via different media. The experts also propose that the strategies to reach different target groups – in this case the general public on the one hand and the nursing mothers on the other – should be parallel and coordinated. This concept could be implemented nationwide in Germany, for example with the support of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture in close cooperation with the National Breastfeeding Committee, the "Gesund ins Leben" ("Healthy Start to Life") network and other associations, or it could be integrated in current initiatives to promote the health of children and families organised by the Federal Ministry of Health (BMG) or the Federal Ministry Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSJ). Attempts to raise awareness for this topic could be simultaneously made in newspapers, radio and television (radio spots, in TV series) as well as in cinema commercials and through poster campaigns. A special stamp could also be printed to draw attention to this issue. The use of "positive storytelling" is a concrete option that is specifically recommended in this context.

At the same time, selected associations that are in a position to exert influence could be contacted and invited to take part. The findings of the BfR study and the negative examples of breastfeeding in public in some restaurants suggest that restaurant associations might be key contacts in this respect, for example. Equally, multipliers in the healthcare sector like midwives, paediatricians and gynaecologists could also positively influence breastfeeding by women in public spaces.

The concept could be supplemented by choosing one or more municipalities with whom regional concepts along the lines of "nursing-friendly municipality" can be drawn up and implemented in order to promote acceptance of breastfeeding in public. This approach has the advantage that the municipalities themselves would become involved. Each town or city can develop their own tailor-made concept aimed at improving acceptance and encouraging local people to identify with the content of the campaign. In this context, the municipality could provide a unique image for the campaign in the form of a logo or individual solutions – such as the installation of breastfeeding-friendly armchairs with high recognition value. The core message could also be effectively spread at local level through such things as press conferences and the inclusion of institutions (local health authority or youth welfare office) and even local companies in the campaign. The widespread discussion and debate on the topic could also promote the sustainability of the campaign. Invitations to apply for project funding could also be published in order to make this concept more interesting to towns and municipalities. Campaigns on this local level should also be developed with the help of professional marketing experts.

Evaluation is an important part of the process, as it permits measurement and assessment of the effects and success of campaigns. In the initiatives presented here, both measurement of changes in attitudes/perceptions and measurement of effects would be conceivable. Changes in attitudes and perceptions could be established using before/after questionnaires both with the general public and with nursing mothers. Measurement of effects would be considerably more time-consuming and would require measurement of breastfeeding behaviour in public before and after the campaign e.g. by direct counting of breastfeeding mothers at specific locations.

## **4.2 Provision and labelling of rooms for breastfeeding**

Some women will always prefer a quiet and protected environment for breastfeeding, irrespective of acceptance levels for breastfeeding in public. Targeted measures aimed at this group of women could promote nursing outside the home. These women would greatly benefit from the additional creation of nursing rooms (e.g. in all public buildings), particularly if these locations are easy to find (via a breastfeeding app, for instance). Initiatives of this kind already exist in Switzerland and the Netherlands, but there are also local initiatives of this type in Germany.

Switzerland has a national app funded by the breastfeeding promotion scheme that lists all the nursing-friendly locations throughout the country and beyond. The nursing-friendly locations are suggested and assessed by nursing mothers themselves [22]. This concept already appears to be highly refined and could be expanded to Germany and Europe if the necessary financial resources were in place.

In the Netherlands, the initiative to mark nursing-friendly locations using stickers in windows or the storefront windows of restaurants, shops and other facilities appears to be a highly promising approach [23].

One example for a regional campaign that is already enjoying success with nappy-changing and breastfeeding points is in the Rhine-Neckar metropolitan region [24].

Rooms of this kind are currently marked by feeding bottles or as a nappy-changing room. A more suitable pictogram should be used for rooms that are suitable for breastfeeding. A possible symbol is the one below, which is already used in many countries and is not subject to any kind of copyright restrictions.



You can find more information on the topic of breastfeeding on the BfR website at:

[http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/a-z\\_index/breastfeeding-130181.html](http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/a-z_index/breastfeeding-130181.html)



The "Opinion app" of the BfR

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### **About the National Breastfeeding Committee at the BfR**

The National Breastfeeding Committee was founded in 1994 with the aim of promoting a new breastfeeding culture in the Federal Republic of Germany and helping to ensure that breastfeeding becomes the normal form of nutrition for infants. The Committee is composed of members of medical professional associations and organisations who are committed to the issue of breastfeeding in Germany. You can find more information on the work of the National Breastfeeding Committee on the Internet at:

[http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/national\\_breastfeeding\\_committee-742.html](http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/national_breastfeeding_committee-742.html)

### **About the BfR**

The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is a scientifically independent institution within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in Germany. It advises the Federal Government and Federal Laender on questions of food, chemical and product safety. The BfR conducts its own research on topics that are closely linked to its assessment tasks.

*This text version is a translation of the original German text which is the only legally binding version*