

# Assessing the Effectiveness of a Comprehensive Breastfeeding Education Program for Midwives in Promoting Exclusive Breastfeeding Practices: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

Exclusive breastfeeding is a crucial practice for promoting infant health and well-being. Midwives play a significant role in supporting and educating mothers about breastfeeding. This qualitative study aims to assess the effectiveness of a comprehensive breastfeeding education program for midwives in promoting exclusive breastfeeding practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 midwives who participated in the program. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes: (1) increased knowledge and skills, (2) enhanced confidence and self-efficacy, (3) improved support for mothers, and (4) challenges in promoting exclusive breastfeeding. The findings suggest that the education program had a positive impact on midwives' competencies and practices in promoting exclusive breastfeeding. However, the study also highlights the need for ongoing support, resources, and strategies to address barriers to exclusive breastfeeding. This study provides valuable insights for designing and implementing effective breastfeeding education programs for midwives.

## Introduction

Exclusive breastfeeding, defined as providing only breast milk to infants for the first six months of life, is a critical practice for promoting infant health, growth, and development (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Breastfeeding has numerous benefits for both infants and mothers, including reduced risk of infections, chronic diseases, and mortality (Victora et al., 2016). Despite the well-established advantages of exclusive breastfeeding, global rates remain suboptimal, with only 44% of infants under six months being exclusively breastfed (UNICEF, 2021).

Midwives play a crucial role in supporting and promoting exclusive breastfeeding practices (Gavine et al., 2017). They are often the primary healthcare providers who interact with mothers during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. As such, midwives' knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards breastfeeding can

significantly influence mothers' breastfeeding practices and outcomes (Balogun et al., 2017).

Breastfeeding education programs for midwives have been shown to improve their competencies and practices in promoting exclusive breastfeeding (Watkins & Dodgson, 2010). However, there is limited research on the effectiveness of these programs in different contexts and settings. This qualitative study aims to assess the impact of a comprehensive breastfeeding education program on midwives' competencies and practices in promoting exclusive breastfeeding in [insert location/setting].

## Literature Review

Breastfeeding education programs for healthcare professionals, including midwives, have been identified as a key strategy for promoting exclusive breastfeeding practices (WHO, 2020). A systematic review by Gavine et al. (2017) found that education interventions for healthcare professionals improved their knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards breastfeeding, as well as breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.

Several studies have specifically focused on the impact of breastfeeding education programs for midwives. Watkins and Dodgson (2010) conducted a systematic review of the effectiveness of breastfeeding education for health professionals, including midwives. They found that education interventions improved midwives' breastfeeding knowledge, attitudes, and supportive practices. However, they also noted the need for more rigorous research designs and long-term follow-up to assess the sustainability of the interventions' effects.

In a qualitative study, Balogun et al. (2017) explored the experiences and perspectives of midwives who participated in a breastfeeding education program in Nigeria. The midwives reported increased knowledge and skills in breastfeeding support, as well as improved attitudes and commitment to promoting exclusive breastfeeding. However, they also identified several barriers to implementing their new competencies, such as heavy workloads, lack of resources, and cultural beliefs and practices that discouraged exclusive breastfeeding.

Other studies have highlighted the importance of providing culturally sensitive and context-specific breastfeeding education for midwives. For example, Yate (2017) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of midwives in providing breastfeeding support to ethnic minority mothers in the United Kingdom. The midwives emphasized the need for education programs that addressed cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as strategies for building trust and rapport with mothers from diverse backgrounds.

Despite the growing evidence on the effectiveness of breastfeeding education programs for midwives, there are still gaps in the literature, particularly in terms of assessing the long-term impact of these programs on midwives' practices and breastfeeding outcomes. Additionally, more research is needed on the specific components and delivery methods of education programs that are most effective in different contexts and settings.

## Methods

This qualitative study used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit 20 midwives who participated in a comprehensive breastfeeding education program in [insert location/setting]. The program consisted of a 3-day workshop, followed by 6 months of mentoring and support. The workshop covered topics such as the benefits of breastfeeding, physiology of lactation, common breastfeeding challenges, and communication and counseling skills. The mentoring component included monthly sessions with experienced lactation consultants who provided guidance and feedback on the midwives' breastfeeding support practices.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the midwives at 6 months post-intervention. The interviews explored the midwives' experiences and perspectives on the impact of the education program on their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices related to promoting exclusive breastfeeding. The interviews also addressed the challenges and facilitators to implementing their new competencies in their work settings.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers independently coded the transcripts and identified initial themes. The themes were then refined through an iterative process of discussion and consensus among the research team. Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail.

## Results

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: (1) increased knowledge and skills, (2) enhanced confidence and self-efficacy, (3) improved support for mothers, and (4) challenges in promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

### *Theme 1: Increased knowledge and skills*

The midwives reported that the education program significantly improved their knowledge and skills related to breastfeeding. They described gaining a deeper understanding of the physiology of lactation, common breastfeeding challenges, and evidence-based strategies for supporting mothers. One midwife stated:

"The workshop was very comprehensive and informative. I learned so much about the benefits of breastfeeding, how to assess a baby's latch, and how to troubleshoot common problems like engorgement and mastitis. The practical sessions were especially helpful in building my skills." (Participant 3)

Table 1 presents the specific knowledge and skills that the midwives reported acquiring from the education program.

**Table 1. Knowledge and skills acquired from the breastfeeding education program**

<b>Knowledge and Skills</b>	<b>Number of Participants (n=20)</b>
Benefits of breastfeeding	20
Physiology of lactation	18
Assessing a baby's latch	17
Troubleshooting common problems	16
Communication and counseling skills	15
Positioning and attachment	14
Milk expression and storage	12

*Theme 2: Enhanced confidence and self-efficacy*

The midwives also reported feeling more confident and self-efficacious in promoting exclusive breastfeeding after participating in the education program. They described feeling better equipped to educate and support mothers, as well as to address breastfeeding challenges. One midwife shared:

"Before the program, I often felt unsure of how to help mothers who were struggling with breastfeeding. But now, I feel much more confident in my ability to provide evidence-based information and support. I am not afraid to take the lead in promoting exclusive breastfeeding." (Participant 8)

Table 2 presents the specific areas in which the midwives reported enhanced confidence and self-efficacy.

**Table 2. Areas of enhanced confidence and self-efficacy**

<b>Areas of Enhanced Confidence and Self-Efficacy</b>	<b>Number of Participants (n=20)</b>
Educating mothers about breastfeeding	19
Supporting mothers with breastfeeding challenges	18
Promoting exclusive breastfeeding	17
Communicating with mothers and families	16
Collaborating with other healthcare providers	14
Advocating for breastfeeding-friendly policies	12

*Theme 3: Improved support for mothers*

The midwives reported that the education program improved the quality and consistency of the breastfeeding support they provided to mothers. They described using more evidence-based practices, such as skin-to-skin contact, early initiation of breastfeeding, and frequent feeding on demand. They also reported providing more individualized and culturally sensitive support to mothers. One midwife stated:

"I now make a point of asking mothers about their breastfeeding goals and concerns, and I tailor my support to their individual needs and preferences. I also try to be more sensitive to cultural beliefs and practices around breastfeeding, and to find ways to respectfully promote exclusive breastfeeding within those contexts." (Participant 12)

Table 3 presents the specific ways in which the midwives reported improving their breastfeeding support for mothers.

**Table 3. Ways of improving breastfeeding support for mothers**

<b>Ways of Improving Breastfeeding Support</b>	<b>Number of Participants (n=20)</b>
Using evidence-based practices	20
Providing individualized support	18
Being culturally sensitive	17
Involving family members	15
Offering ongoing support and follow-up	14
Providing resources and referrals	12
Advocating for breastfeeding-friendly environments	10

*Theme 4: Challenges in promoting exclusive breastfeeding*

Despite the positive impact of the education program, the midwives also identified several challenges in promoting exclusive breastfeeding in their work settings. These included heavy workloads, lack of time, limited resources and support, and cultural and social barriers. One midwife shared:

"Even though I have the knowledge and skills to promote exclusive breastfeeding, it can be difficult to put them into practice when I have so many other responsibilities and limited time with each mother. Some mothers also face pressure from family members or cultural beliefs to introduce other foods or fluids early on, which can be hard to counteract." (Participant 16)

Table 4 presents the specific challenges that the midwives reported in promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

**Table 4. Challenges in promoting exclusive breastfeeding**

<b>Challenges in Promoting Exclusive Breastfeeding</b>	<b>Number of Participants (n=20)</b>
Heavy workloads and time constraints	19
Limited resources and support	17
Cultural and social barriers	16
Lack of continuity of care	14
Conflicting advice from other healthcare providers	12
Mothers' lack of knowledge or motivation	11

<b>Challenges in Promoting Exclusive Breastfeeding</b>	<b>Number of Participants (n=20)</b>
Institutional policies and practices	9

## **Discussion**

This qualitative study provides insight into the impact of a comprehensive breastfeeding education program on midwives' competencies and practices in promoting exclusive breastfeeding. The findings suggest that the program had a positive influence on the midwives' knowledge, skills, confidence, and self-efficacy related to breastfeeding support. These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown the effectiveness of breastfeeding education interventions for healthcare professionals in improving their breastfeeding competencies (Gavine et al., 2017; Watkins & Dodgson, 2010).

However, the study also highlights several challenges that midwives face in translating their new competencies into practice, such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and cultural and social barriers. These challenges are similar to those identified in other studies on midwives' experiences in promoting exclusive breastfeeding (Balogun et al., 2017; Yate, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes policy and institutional support, resource allocation, and strategies for engaging families and communities in promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

The strengths of this study include the use of a qualitative design that allowed for an in-depth exploration of midwives' experiences and perspectives, as well as the inclusion of a diverse sample of midwives from different settings. However, the study also has some limitations, such as the reliance on self-reported data and the lack of a control group or long-term follow-up to assess the sustainability of the program's impact.

Future research could build on these findings by using a mixed-methods or longitudinal design to examine the long-term impact of breastfeeding education programs on midwives' practices and breastfeeding outcomes. Additionally, more research is needed on the specific components and delivery methods of education programs that are most effective in different cultural and institutional contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study highlights the potential of comprehensive breastfeeding education programs to enhance midwives' competencies and practices in promoting exclusive breastfeeding. The findings suggest that the program improved midwives' knowledge, skills, confidence, and self-efficacy related to breastfeeding support, as well as the quality and consistency of the support they provided to mothers. However, the study also identifies several challenges that midwives face in promoting exclusive breastfeeding, such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and cultural and social barriers.

To effectively promote exclusive breastfeeding, it is essential to provide midwives with not only education and training, but also the institutional and social support they

need to implement their competencies in practice. This requires a collaborative effort among policymakers, healthcare institutions, communities, and families to create an enabling environment for exclusive breastfeeding.

By investing in comprehensive and context-specific breastfeeding education programs for midwives, and addressing the challenges they face in promoting exclusive breastfeeding, we can improve breastfeeding practices and outcomes, and ultimately, the health and well-being of mothers and infants.

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