

# Connecting With Today's Mothers

## Breastfeeding Support Online

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*Since the mid-1990s, women have been using the Internet to offer breastfeeding support to one another. As technology has rapidly changed, mothers have kept up with the pace and found ways to embrace the changes, using them to their advantage. It is essential for all who work with breastfeeding mothers in a professional capacity to understand the generational differences that exist, oftentimes between mothers and providers. For lactation professionals, it is valuable to know how mothers use the Internet, and the platforms they are using, for breastfeeding support. Whether it is through social media platforms or blogging, lactation professionals have more ways than ever before to help mothers by offering their expertise in online settings.*

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In the last two decades, we have watched the Internet transform our culture in countless ways. Cyberspace has been proven to be an extremely powerful tool that we have been able to harness, allowing people to connect in new ways, and therefore collaborate in great numbers and across great distances. Perhaps one of the best examples is in the support that women give one another with respect to pregnancy, breastfeeding, and parenting. Today's uniquely interactive social media platforms and devices, such as smart phones, give mothers greater access to valuable online breastfeeding help. Because women are turning online in record numbers, it is important that lactation professionals meet these mothers where they are, whether it is through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, or other popular social media sites (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIFYPQjYhv8&feature=youtu.be>).

### A Brief History of Online Breastfeeding Support

With respect to breastfeeding support, the first women to use the Internet for this purpose did so through listservs and email loops in the mid-1990s. Small groups of women reached out, often lacking assistance in their own local communities and social circles, to others who were in the same place in life as they were: breastfeeding their babies and navigating the uncharted waters of motherhood. One of the first listservs formed by an international cohort of breastfeeding mothers was called Parent-L. Today, as the creators and original members of Parent-L have gone from being mothers to grandmothers and from using a listserv to a private Facebook group to maintain their relationships, they realize they paved the way for women connecting via digital technology.

Almost two decades ago, establishing a website, or even starting a listserv, was not something that just anyone could do. Hanna Graeffe, a Parent-L member from Finland, recently recognized by one of the largest baby magazines in her country as an online pioneer of breastfeeding support, noted it was necessary to know someone from a university to establish a listserv (Audelo, 2013). When we look at the legacy of listservs (Parent-L, BFAR [breastfeeding after reduction], lactnet), they offered more than just breastfeeding support. Many of these women emerged as leaders in the field of lactation. They wrote the books and articles that we use, and they became key players in breastfeeding initiatives around the world. Graeffe shared that in Finland,

*The National Breastfeeding Association started forming and growing from that list, and now the association has several employees, and a position as the breastfeeding expert in this country; There are plenty of support groups, both real-life and online available, as well as a national phone line you can call for breastfeeding support. All this came from the breastfeeding email list! (Audelo, 2013, p. 21)*

Mothers in need took this new technology, which did not offer today's intuitive and user-friendly interfaces and mastered it for their own benefit and to help other mothers. As is true in today's online communities, there was a regular flow of information back and forth. Anthropologist, Kathy Dettwyler, was an original Parent-L member. She stated,

*Remember, by the time the Internet came along, I had nursed three kids and spent my career doing research on breastfeeding, including speaking at conferences, and writing articles and books. I was the one providing support. I set up a website with lots of articles and links. (Audelo, 2013, p. 20)*

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Mothers who connect online with each other today—whether through blogs, Facebook, or Twitter—can trace the foundation of these networks back to the listservs and women who were the online pioneers in breastfeeding support (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuhD4om5poA>).

## Understanding Generational Differences

Our ages often have a direct effect on the rate at which we embrace new technology and on our ability to adopt change. Baby boomers have witnessed the swift technological changes that have occurred in the past few decades and often feel overwhelmed by what they need to learn. In contrast, Generation X and Millennials have grown up with technology and became connected at an early age. The online queries of the Generation Xers (Gen Xers) and Millennials do not go online to look up recipes for dinner or map out directions; they seek answers to some of their most personal questions online.

Kathryn Zickuhr (2010) studied these three generations and their use of the Internet and found that searching for health information, an activity that was once the primary domain of older adults, is now the third most popular online activity for all Internet users 18 years and older. A study published in 2009, examining the sociodemographic and health-related factors associated with current adult social media users in the U.S., found that the potential for impacting the health and health behavior of the general U.S. population through social media is tremendous (Chou, Hunt, Beckjord, Moser, & Hesse, 2009). With medical information being some of the most sought-after knowledge online, it is no surprise that pregnant women and new mothers might also find digital information about all things related to motherhood to be valuable.

It is important that we know how each generation uses the Internet because that knowledge helps us figure out the nuances of how the younger mothers prefer to be addressed and how they like to obtain information. Diana West, International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC), author, cofounder of <http://www.bfar.org>, was among the first wave of mothers to use the Internet for support in the 1990s. She recognizes the differences among the generations. West (2011) highlights that today's mothers are increasingly Millennials, but most practices are in danger of becoming outdated because they are geared toward Generation X mothers. When lactation professionals understand what motivates the Millennials, they will be best able to help them. What we are seeing in many cases, and partly because Millennial mothers are quick and eager to share their opinions, is that the “younger, socially savvy mothers may be more willing to

listen to their peers than seek the advice of an (older, more experienced) lactation professional” (Lopez, 2012, p. 39). If this is the case, how can we make sure that the lactation professional remains a vital part of the support network?

## Embracing the Change

Social media is an ever-changing phenomenon, and many feel that they are just scratching the surface. “We are at the age where we need to be wired for new technologies, as well as being able to speak the shorthand defining each new medium” (Breheny, 2011, p. 3). Online support communities have been around for more than 20 years and are clearly not a fad. Lactation professionals need to understand online support if they want to reach mothers where they are today.

Although the ever-changing landscape of technology can at times seem overwhelming, it is important to remember that reaching new mothers is most effective when we engage them in the places where they are asking questions (Lopez, 2012, p. 40).

Recognizing the changing times, the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) called on IBCLCs to embrace social media and use it as a way to disseminate accurate, evidence-based information (McCann & McCulloch, 2012). In her Call to Action in 2011, Dr. Regina Benjamin, the former U.S. surgeon general, noted that social media was an important tool for reaching breastfeeding mothers (McCann & McCulloch, 2012).

To truly understand the reach of social media, we must recognize that Facebook, the most popular and widely used platform, has more than 1 billion users, and three-quarters of those access the site through their mobile devices (Constine, 2013). The Internet is not just a place to visit for information. It is participative, highly interactive, and for more than a billion people worldwide, an integral part of daily life. We should not discount the value of face-to-face interaction, of course; but for many women, the introduction to breastfeeding and the lactation professional comes by way of social media: a blog, a Facebook page, or a Twitter account. As such, the opportunity exists for mothers to reach reliable information from professionals on these platforms. It is hoped that we see how important social media is to women of childbearing age and be aware of the value in supporting women through these channels.

## Blogs

All social media platforms vary in their appeal, but blogs are to be noted as an especially valuable resource for professionals and mothers. Blogging allows professionals

to share their information with a wider audience than they can reach locally. Mothers can access the information when it is convenient for them. The statistics prove that blogs are sought-after resources, with 81% of mothers reporting that blogs “help build confidence about parenting skills,” and 67% use them as a primary source of parenting advice (McCann & McCulloch, 2012). Robin Kaplan, an IBCLC in private practice, found that her blog filled this exact need.

*While there is never a shortage of content when it comes to breastfeeding, there are plenty of bad articles about breastfeeding on the Internet. My goal is to write articles that offer evidence-based recommendations in a non-judgmental way, for mothers to refer to in years to come. (Audelo, 2013, p. 176)*

It is critical to provide evidence-based information for those mothers who are searching. Some women never seek breastfeeding advice in person—for various reasons, ranging from monetary constraints to geographical limitations—but they might just meet their breastfeeding goals with information online. There are likely countless women who owe their breastfeeding success to their online support communities.

### **Formula Companies Are Also Adept at Social Media**

In addition, it is worth noting that companies—ranging from the largest infant formula companies to small businesses selling unique, even homemade baby products and wares—use social media constantly to reach mothers. These companies know where moms are and have chosen to meet them online. The infant formula industry is quite adept at orchestrating and executing savvy social media campaigns, which all offer a wide array of infant-feeding advice, including breastfeeding information. These companies, with huge advertising budgets, spend millions annually, knowing that if they offer breastfeeding advice, they can reach mothers.

They often promote their help hotlines through social media or sponsor prominent advertisements on popular blogs with large followings of mothers. The top hits on a Google search for breastfeeding, which yields more than 26 million results in less than half a second, are from the websites of formula companies. How many mothers have clicked on one of those links that offers breastfeeding advice, only to be bombarded with advertisements that promote formula? And it doesn't stop there. Formula companies offer free smartphone applications and sponsor Twitter parties that offer prize products. McCulloch and McCann (2013) suggest that lactation professionals acting as advocates for breastfeeding mothers must not

only keep up with technological changes but also seize the opportunities that social media offers in terms of engaging in meaningful conversations that will affect positive change.

### **Today's Mothers: Digital Natives**

Generation X and Millennial mothers are digital natives, so it stands to reason that they spend more time online when their babies are born. Statistics show that time spent using the Internet increases by as much as 44% after giving birth; in addition, 71% of parents are Facebook users, and 81% of those are mothers (McCulloch & McCann, 2013). If mothers are going online for health information, is it because they are not able to obtain answers to their questions from their health care providers? Perhaps providers are not wholly aware of their patients' desire for more health information (Gray, 2013, p. 7). Some of the most frequently asked questions in online settings “are about initial feeding decisions and the need for providers to address stress-related feeding problems” (Gray, 2013, p. 7). If this is the case, then we can assume the mothers need lactation professionals to fill this void for them. If they are not talking to healthcare providers, then where are they finding valuable, reliable, evidence-based information about these critical issues and questions?

*Through the use of online channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, or dedicated informational Web pages and apps, IBCLCs can provide searchable answers or have quick, direct engagement that takes less time than a phone call or office visit . . . Used wisely, social media can act as a valuable back-up assistant. (Lopez, 2012, p. 40)*

It is not only beneficial for lactation professionals to use social media for the purpose of supporting mothers and babies, but doing so also has great potential benefits for business, whether it is private practice, hospital, or clinic.

A wonderful example of professionals and mothers working together to foster mother-to-mother support, and valuable resources in local communities, is through breastfeeding awareness events. The Big Latch On, which has been held the last few years during World Breastfeeding Week in August, is a gathering that serves mothers and professionals alike. Aimed at increasing awareness, the event owes its grassroots marketing success to social media. Mothers have embraced and promoted it through various platforms and, as a result, turnout set record numbers. Events such as these help lactation professionals connect with local individual women and groups, all the while using the global social media network to promote and protect breastfeeding.

We do not know exactly how many lactation professionals there are who use social media regularly because there has yet to be any data published. According to the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA), there are more than 13,200 IBCLCs in the U.S. ILCA's Facebook page has more than 8,500 followers, but that number includes all Facebook users (mothers, volunteer breastfeeding supporters, and professionals), not just IBCLCs. It is probably safe to say there are many IBCLCs who do not have a social media presence. This number will increase as more baby boomers adopt social media, and as Gen Xers and Millennials assume the torch passed to them from the older generation of lactation professionals. These mothers will encourage all lactation professional to embrace "significant changes in the way we promote and [support] breastfeeding . . . [including] the adoption of new and emerging technologies" (Heinig, 2009, p. 263).

## Conclusion

Social media is, in effect, a new language that we have to learn to speak, because without it we risk the inability to make initial connections with future generations of breastfeeding mothers. We must remember who our target audience is, where they are, what they are looking for, and how they prefer to be engaged. And just as important, we cannot neglect the fact that to promote breastfeeding and the profession, IBCLCs need to be willing to use social media to stay informed and up-to-date with current events relevant to the profession, stay connected to their colleagues, and to help inform mothers with reliable information. Lactation professionals do not have to master every platform or have a presence on every social media site. But working to bridge the technology gap, at your own comfort level, is vital to keeping touch with today's moms. The Internet serves to introduce lactation professionals to mothers who need your expertise, and a social media presence provides a way for you to connect.

It is evident that in 2013, mothers have built their villages online as support networks that are often closely knit and are rarely static. We need to know where they are, meet them there, and be willing to offer the support they need, in ways they grasp.

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Lara Audelo, CLEC, is the mom of two young boys and is passionate about raising awareness for breastfeeding and supporting mothers and babies in meeting their breastfeeding goals. She believes increased education for all is key to supporting moms and that online breastfeeding support is fast becoming a critical tool for helping mothers achieve their infant feeding goals. A breastfeeding mom for more than seven years, she received her Certified Lactation Education Counselor (CLEC) credential from University of California, San Diego.