

BEAR HUGS: An AAP CATCH Resident Grant Project to Empower Families through Breastfeeding Education

By Hyo-Jung Choi, MD, PGY-4

Racial and ethnic disparities exist in breastfeeding initiation and duration.¹⁻¹⁶ Data consistently shows that Black, Hispanic, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native women are less likely to breastfeed their infants when compared with other racial/ethnic groups.^{1,4,8-9,12-13} Black women in particular experience a disproportionate number of barriers including lack of peer, family, or social support, insufficient education and support in health care settings, and concerns about navigating breastfeeding and employment.^{2,4,8-9,12-15} This is troubling because suboptimal breastfeeding can have negative impacts on health outcomes for mother and infant.

As a chief resident physician at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, a county hospital located in Los Angeles (LA) County that serves primarily Medi-Cal and uninsured patients, I saw this firsthand. My interest in encouraging and empowering women to exclusively breastfeed started after my newborn nursery rotation as an intern. Every day on rounds we would discuss our exclusive breastfeeding rates, and most days, we were at 50%.

While counseling mothers, I found many women initiated formula because of their perception of inadequate supply, nipple pain or soreness, and/or infant inconsolability due to hunger. My co-residents and I expressed frustration at this situation since we felt these mothers had not previously received adequate education about breastfeeding. Further, the providers' messaging that "breastfeeding is best" and their reassurances about breastfeeding often came too late. Mothers often felt guilty when initiating formula feeding and felt judged by the staff. Hearing these sentiments from the newborns' mothers was alarming given all the known stressors in the postpartum period. Healthcare providers should be allies and advocates for mothers and not judge a woman's choice on how to feed their child.

I joined our hospital's Breastfeeding Taskforce to provide a voice from a resident's perspective and to work to address these issues. While on the taskforce, I learned that there was an obvious gap in education during the prenatal period. The patient population we serve at Harbor have a lower breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates in comparison to higher-income populations in LA County.^{8,12,16} I suspect it may be due to situations that I previously described. The lack of access to quality health education has detrimental effects on mother and child.

Following these experiences early in my residency training, I applied for an American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Community Access To Child Health (CATCH) resident grant and am a recipient for the 2021-2022 cycle. My AAP CATCH grant project aims to address barriers to breastfeeding by creating free pediatrician-led breastfeeding classes via video conference every three months. By targeting women during the prenatal period, we aim to increase quality breastfeeding education during this critical period before childbirth. We are partnering with MAMAs Neighborhood, a program that primarily serves LA County Medi-Cal and uninsured women, and who are enrolled with the Department of Health Services or a community partner.

MAMAs Neighborhood program focuses on providing multidisciplinary care for expectant mothers with multiple social needs (e.g. homelessness, food insecurity, psychosocial stressors) and serves over 2,000 expectant mothers each year. A majority of the women are between the ages of 20 and 29, identify as racial minorities (Black/African-American or Hispanic), and are Medi-Cal beneficiaries.⁸

The AAP CATCH resident grant project will complement the work carried out by MAMAs Neighborhood health educators and integrate a multi-disciplinary team to provide breastfeeding education. By having a pediatrician lead these classes, our aim is to increase access to pediatricians, empower women to search for a medical home prior to

delivery, and to educate women on the benefits of breastfeeding. Our goal is to establish a strong, trusting, and culturally sensitive relationship through these classes.



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