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The role of early maternal support in balancing full-time work and infant exclusive breastfeeding: A qualitative study

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Statement of the Problem: Support of others is a key factor for mothers who choose to breast feed their infants including those who balance work outside the home and breast feeding. However, little research has been done to understand how maternal support during the postpartum period impacts mothers' ability to later balance work and breast feeding in particular full-time work and exclusive breast feeding.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: In order to understand the experience of low income women who successfully balance full-time work and exclusive breastfeeding for the recommended six months, interviews were conducted with women who met study criteria for income level, work status and exclusive breast feeding. Breast feeding peer counselors were also interviewed as key informants. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for themes. The results of both sets of interviews were triangulated with a focused literature review to assure the soundness of the qualitative analysis.

Findings: The results of this qualitative study indicate that the timing of support plays a key role in mothers' ability to successfully overcome barriers during the early post-partum period thus building maternal self-efficacy in addressing problems encountered when they return to work. Timing of support included acute support, such as help establishing a successful latch, needed during the first two weeks after delivery to deal with breastfeeding problems that mothers perceived as being mentally and emotionally overwhelming and longer-term support needed to overcome problems perceived as being less intense.

Conclusion & Significance: The research invites further exploration into the relationship between breastfeeding support provided by mothers' support system, including healthcare professionals, during the post-partum period and rates of breastfeeding duration and exclusivity.

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