

Support group feature

Cradles Breastfeeding Group, Ilkeston

Cradles Breastfeeding Group is a team of experienced Peer Supporters and mothers who volunteer their time to offer companionship and help to breastfeeding women within the local community. All of our Peer Supporters have breastfed for at least six months and have completed an intensive training programme facilitated by Derbyshire Community Health Services (NHS) following the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative.

The weekly drop in sessions provide the opportunity for nursing mothers to meet in a friendly and sociable environment amongst likeminded people. On the last Thursday of each month, the first hour of the session is dedicated to antenatal, where expectant mothers are invited to join us.

Cradles was formed in 2005 in conjunction with Sure Start Erewash and the NHS Primary Care Trust. The group was created to provide a friendly and accessible service to mothers in the Ilkeston area, which aimed to help women with breastfeeding challenges. The first group of volunteers completed their training in July 2005 and began visiting local postnatal clinics.

One of the founding members recalls it was a struggle to come up with a name for the group. "We needed something that not only linked to the subject matter but also was easily memorable. Originally we came up with 'Bras' as bras support breasts, and we support mums. But we thought that was a really dreadful idea and that we ought to come up with something better. Cradles seemed ideal, you cradle your baby and we cradle you and the name stuck!"



- Two of our committee members are NHS Breastfeeding Support Workers
- We have a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest
- 2015 marks our 10th anniversary as an established group
- All 18 volunteers have been trained by Derbyshire Community Healthcare and has breastfed for a minimum of 6 months
- We offer monthly events at our drop in sessions

'Moving goalposts' by Sam Reilly from Cradles breastfeeding support group

I was always going to breastfeed my baby, or at least try to. I'd grown up seeing my cousins breastfeed their children and, although I'd played with baby dolls and fed them with bottles, I'd also held my baby dolls to my chest and pretended to breastfeed them, since I'd realised that's how you feed a real baby. I did have sufficient doubt in my ability to do so and did end up buying bottles and other bottle-feeding ephemera, but we hoped breastfeeding would work out. The plan was to breastfeed for six months, as per the government recommendations we'd only half read.

When my midwife asked how I planned to feed the baby and I told her I would breastfeed, that was that. She smiled, ticked a box, and carried on. I had already assumed that, because it's natural, breastfeeding would come naturally, and the fact she didn't say anything else or give me any advice just cemented that assumption. She told me about the local breastfeeding support group, but the impression I got was that you only went there if you were having problems, so why would I go before my baby was even born? I took an antenatal class through the National Childbirth Trust, and breastfeeding was covered in one of the sessions, but this only further cemented my assumption that I would find it easy and I didn't bother to seek any further information.

I had a traumatic birth. At my routine midwife appointment when I was 39 weeks pregnant, elevated protein levels in my urine meant I was admitted immediately to hospital and the decision was made to induce labour the following afternoon. Not a lot happened so I was taken back to a maternity ward and my husband was sent home. It wasn't much later that I began to experience *extremely* painful contractions and he was called back. They told him I was 'having a bit of discomfort', which he took to mean he had time to do the dishes, tidy up and nip to the supermarket for some energy drinks as it seemed he would be in for a long night!

By the time he got to the hospital I was back on the labour ward, about to begin pushing, sucking down gas and air like it was going out of fashion. Any later and, if things had gone smoothly, he might have missed the birth!

As it happened, I'd gotten myself into a bit of an awkward position, and so had our baby. I pushed, and I pushed, but the baby was going nowhere. The baby was getting stressed and I was getting tired. A sudden rush of emergencies meant my OB kept being called away so she never got a chance to try and move the baby into a better position. I had to be given drugs to re-start my contractions and I was also given an epidural for the pain. So much for my planned drug-free water birth! By this point I had been pushing for around four hours with no baby to show for it.

The decision was made to take me to theatre and deliver the baby with forceps and, if that didn't work, to perform a caesarean section. How ironic: due to low lying placenta, a section had been on the cards since the early weeks, and I'd been happy about this as I was *terrified* of giving birth. When a later scan revealed it had moved, it was difficult for me to come to terms with the fact I had no choice, but I did, and ended up feeling really positive about it; I was devastated when the surgeon said there was no point even trying with forceps.

The operation went smoothly until I actually saw my baby for the first time. I hadn't known up until then whether I'd want the baby handed straight to me or cleaned up first but the moment I saw my son instinct kicked in and I reached up to take him. He was passed straight over my head and outstretched arms to be weighed, measured and cleaned up and I didn't get to hold him until I was in the recovery room. By that point my opportunity to bond had gone and I felt no connection to this baby in my arms at all.

I didn't get to attempt breastfeeding until much later and it was only then that I realised I didn't have a clue what to do! I felt stupid and helpless. Whenever he cried I thought it must be because he was hungry, and it didn't take long for doubts about my ability to make enough milk crept in. His latch was also poor and my nipples ended up horribly cracked, which made feeding almost unbearably painful.

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Sam Reilly and son

We supplemented with formula before we'd even left hospital, purely due to our ignorance and lack of effective support from the hospital staff. Looking back I should have insisted on seeing a breastfeeding counsellor that first night, not sat sobbing because the midwife had asked me if I wanted her to give my son a bottle and I didn't want to say yes. I remember saying 'no, I want to breastfeed but...' but no offer of help came so I relented. Looking back, we should have realised he didn't NEED the supplements when they came back up within minutes. But I was still so overwhelmed by the whole birth experience that I couldn't think rationally.

At home, breastfeeding continued to be a struggle, and we supplemented (ignorantly and often unnecessarily) for several months afterwards. We finally cracked it thanks to the support of the local breastfeeding support worker, Rachel, and I told my husband in no uncertain terms that no more bottles were to be given. Until that point, I'd not had the confidence to nurse him in public, mainly because I needed to get my whole boob out to get him latched properly. I fed him for the first time in public in a supermarket car park after deliberately not bringing a bottle with us when I knew he'd want a feed during the time we were out. I struggled, but got him latched fine beneath a muslin cloth. I

never bothered taking a bottle with us when we went out after that and, after accidentally forgetting to pick up the muslin cloth on several occasions, I started to not care about who saw what and, in time, I got better at latching him without showing much off anyway. I noticed a few negative stares from other women early on, but I never let it bother me and if anyone has disapproved since then I've either not noticed or given off a 'don't say anything or else!' sort of vibe - and you can bet I would stand up for my rights if anyone did!

After visiting me to help solve a blocked duct issue, Rachel told me that the breastfeeding support group were looking to recruit more volunteers, and she thought I might be interested, having had such a difficult time to begin with, I might be able to inspire and support other mums who were going through the same thing. I jumped at the chance, but it was only at that point I started attending the group. My son would soon be six months old and, until I started the training, I honestly didn't think you *could* breastfeed after six months (this was despite also thinking prior to having my son that women who breastfed toddlers were 'weird' - I blame the birth trauma and subsequent post-partum depression for doing strange things to my head...).

When I realised I'd been completely and utterly brainwashed into thinking this by formula advertising, I was damned if we'd be stopping at six months! I made a plan to continue for a year, alongside solids when we introduced them. When my son was coming up to a year old, I realised that neither of us was ready to stop. I decided we would continue for two years and then stop.

That decision attracted some raised eyebrows from my family and some of my friends, but no-one has ever openly criticised me. My husband was very wary of extended breastfeeding at first, but I only had to show him the facts and official guidelines which support it to get him on side.

My son will be three in October and he still 'eats boobies' (I have a vague memory of telling my husband that we'd never let him call it anything like that... oh well!) first thing in the morning when he wakes up, and it certainly doesn't feel weird to me. I know it's normal, even if not many people do it!

Breastfeeding supporters are often accused

of being pushy; I just think we're loud. But we HAVE to be loud to be heard in a society that is generally unsupportive of breastfeeding and flooded with misleading information from formula companies and certain baby 'experts' in the media! When I did my peer support training I was shocked at just how much of this I'd fallen for myself, and it has been my mission ever since to get as much accurate information out there as I can to combat this - that's one reason I got us on Facebook and Twitter; it means we can get the information straight to our mums at any time

of day or night. That might be sharing the latest piece of research that confirms one of the many positive effects of breastfeeding, or one mum's story of how she overcame a particularly difficult problem, or perhaps just a funny cartoon, or perhaps just a snippet of information that will reassure a mum that what her baby is doing is normal. And if it helps just one mum to reach her breastfeeding goal, even if that goal keeps changing as her journey progresses as mine did, then I've done my bit.

By Sam Reilly

Raising money and breastfeeding awareness



Anita Bailey from Cradles breastfeeding support group being presented with a cheque for community fund from the University of Derby which they applied for for World Breastfeeding Week to fund a stall in the marketplace and literature at their summer fayre.

A local councillor and colleague presents Anita Bailey from Cradles Breastfeeding Support Group with a cheque for national breastfeeding week, following the opening of their picnic in the park to encourage nursing in public.

