

# Clontarf mums gather **BREASTFEEDING GROUP A VITAL SUPPORT TOOL**

**A** LARGE group of mums and babies from the Clontarf area gathered in the Vernon Avenue Health Centre for cake and a cuppa to celebrate National Breastfeeding Week.

For public health nurse Agnes Flynn, the other 51 weeks of the year are just as important for the breastfeeding journeys of local mums, who gain vital support from the peer group she runs in the centre weekly.

Agnes has been a consistent advocate for breastfeeding mums in the area for the last 18 years, helping to keep the support group going. Since January, it now meets every week. The popular Agnes acknowledged the importance of holding the group weekly. It had previously met fortnightly due to staffing constraints.

"As one mum said today, it is one step, one day and one week at a time until the next group. If a mum is having a problem or is feeling like the breastfeeding is getting too much for her, she knows that she just has to see it out the few days until the group meets again so she can talk to the other mums there and get some advice. That

is why was vital that we got back to meeting weekly," she explained.

Due in no small part to the presence of the group and the breastfeeding support given by Agnes and her colleagues in Vernon Avenue, breastfeeding rates when leaving hospital are 75pc in the Clontarf area. They are also very high in nearby Marino, who also run a popular support group, run by Anne O'Malley.

Rates nationally are on the increase and Agnes said there are a number of factors for that, including the changes to maternity leave.

"When we started the group, mums were only getting three months of maternity leave so many were opting not to breastfeed or felt they could only feed for those first three months before returning to work. I think the introduction of paternity leave will also prove to be a great thing, with dads around for longer to support the mums through the early days of breastfeeding that can be the toughest," she said.

"The delayed introduction of solids has also helped. The message is getting out there that babies should not have any food until six months

and that mum's milk is all they need until then. Of course, there are a lot more nationalities in the country nowadays, bringing their own culture of breastfeeding to Irish mums."

Agnes highlighted the improvement in support and upskilling for public health nurses themselves when it came to training in breastfeeding.

"I breastfed all my children so I had the advantage of that personal experience. But there have been great advances in the training in recent years. Firstly, all student public health nurses receive the 20-hour breastfeeding course while in their respective universities. Secondly, public health nurses visit all mothers postnatally and establish a good relationship with the mother. Mothers are observed breastfeeding and appropriate support is provided.

"In CHO9, we use the breastfeeding observation tool (BOAT). This informs appropriate support and guidance for the mother and baby. Ongoing support is important.

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As well as the benefits for mum and baby, breastfeeding is a massive boost for the health service, explained Agnes.

Babies who are not breastfed exclusively for the first three to four months of their lives are at greater risk from gastroenteritis, respiratory, ear and urinary tract infections, allergies and diabetes. They also have a higher risk of becoming obese in later life and the mother has a greater risk of contracting breast or ovarian cancer.

“All the health benefits are there to be seen. Some are not so obvious but they are irrefutable.”

The Vernon Avenue group was first started by public health nurse Mary Cronin. Agnes and Mary ran it together for many years, meeting many challenges along the way.

“Staffing and resources issues meant that we couldn't hold the group as often as we wanted. Staff numbers were low and there was such a large workload that we just didn't have the time. The time spent here with the group is not

protected – we have all of our other visits and work still to be done. It certainly is challenging but there is great dedication across the team here. Aside from the nurses, John and Jess here at the clinic have built up a great relationship with the mothers. We are all part of a team.”

The mums of the group acknowledged the work and support of Agnes and the vital communication with other mothers in the same boat.

Claire was there with eight-week-old Emmet, while his twin sister was at home with daddy. The new mum said the group was invaluable for her as she tackled the challenge of breastfeeding twins.

Rachel and her son Bart, who was almost five months old, said she had been coming to the group every week since Bart was three weeks old.

“I have found it really helpful. I had just moved to the area and it was invaluable to have the expert advice on hand and talking to mums who going through similar things. The group is great for the peer to peer learning, finding out what has worked for other mums and what hasn't,” said Rachel. “Now I'm starting to think about going back to work so it will be good to chat to people who have managed to continue feeding when they returned to work.”

She explained that the group has a What's App group that Agnes helped to get started and it means that there is always advice or support at the end of the phone at any time of day or night.

“It's not even really about breastfeeding. We chat about all sorts of things that we need

advice on. It's a great help to all of us.”

Ruth was there with her young baby Tommy for the first time.

“I came to meet other mums, to have the feeling that you are not alone. I haven't had any problems with breastfeeding and plan to continue for a long time to come. But it's more than just breastfeeding support, it's about getting out and about and meeting people.”

The youngest addition to the group was two-week-old Olive who was there with her mum Emma.

“I met some great people here when I had my son two years ago and got some great advice. It was only natural that I would come back,” said Emma.

Ireland has one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in Europe. One of the goals of the five-year breastfeeding strategy set out in 2005 was to advocate that communities 'promote breastfeeding by empowering families, friendships and community networks'. In addition it called for evidence-based standards for facilitation of breastfeeding support groups to increase the average age at which breastfeeding is reduced or discontinued.

Studies have found that mothers value the support group facilitated by PHNs and recommended increasing their availability, timing, geographic spread and frequency. It was found that groups were popular because they normalised breastfeeding in a social environment, which improved mothers' sense of wellbeing.



The mums gather to celebrate National Breastfeeding Week.