**Nutritious beginnings ensure healthier and happier children**

*Breastfeeding provides children the best start in life. It is a baby’s best source of nutrition, bolstering brain development with lifelong benefits for the mother and the baby.*

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Strong foundation, stronger structure! The foundation for a healthy life and wellbeing is laid in the mother’s womb. The first 1000 days of life – the time spanning roughly between conception and a child’s second birthday - is the most crucial period of development. This is the time when the brain, body and immune system of children develops significantly that holds the key to lifelong physical and mental wellbeing.

The brain develops most rapidly in the first two years of life with 70 per cent of the brain develops in-utero. After birth, it is the child’s environment that shapes brain development. During this period, the brain requires multiple inputs for the growth and development of the nervous system, including the brain. These inputs are stimulation and care, good health and nutrition; and safety and protection to buffer against stress and pollution to allow for the absorption of nutrients.

All these aspects of the environment must work together to build a better brain during early childhood. Therefore, the role of parents and caregivers becomes even more important and begin even before the birth of a child.

Nutrition, indisputably, is most significant for a child’s bright future. Dietary deficiencies, inadequate feeding practices, poor hygiene and sanitation, chronic infections, poor health and nutrition care seeking behaviours, exposure to violence, and low levels of stimulation during this period jeopardize a child’s chance to reach his or her full potential and increase the risk that poor health and poverty will follow that child into adulthood.

Besides nutritional well-being, quality early childhood development also has a critical impact on a child’s future school retention and learning, particularly in the early grades of primary education. When children enter primary school directly without quality preschool education – and thus, without school readiness – they are more likely to drop out and not learn to their potential. Much thus depends on how well children start their education and how prepared they are for school.

Children from the most disadvantaged quintiles of society are at greatest risk of being deprived during this important early period of life. Interventions in the early years can partially compensate for early disadvantage, and are therefore, critical from an equity perspective. Remedial action later in life is less cost effective.

Studies have long established that nutrition deficiency and lack of early learning opportunities during the first 1000 days contribute to the loss of developmental and academic potential, often leading lifelong health and economic disparities. Though the benefits of improved nutrition are not always immediately appreciable, it’s cost-effective. As per the Global Nutrition Report 2015, for every dollar invested in nutrition, a country can get 16 dollars in return. Investing in nutrition has high human and economic returns.

**Healthy mother, healthy baby**

A pregnant mother’s health, nutrition and mental state affects the wellbeing of her child. An expecting mother’s diet, if poor in nutrition, can lead to serious birth defects and have lasting consequences. However, the possibility of birth anomalies can easily be checked with the early provision of optimal maternal nutrition including a diet that is rich in nutrition, supplements and recommended dose of vitamins and minerals. The nutritional well-being of mother also contributes to her good mental health which positively impacts childcare.

Ensuring a safe childbirth is equally crucial. Child delivery in a health facility by a skilled attendant cut down the chances of a mother or newborn falling ill or dying. The skilled birth attendants are also trained in providing proper care to mother and the newborn and therefore play a vital role in initiating early breastfeeding within the first hour of birth.

**Breastfeeding provides children the best start in life**

Breast milk is a baby’s best source of nutrition, bolstering brain development with lifelong benefits for the mother and the baby. Early initiation of breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding (between 0-5 months) and continued breastfeeding (6-23 months) offer a powerful line of defense against infection and malnutrition. In contrast, Infants who are not fully or partially breastfed have a higher risk of diarrhea and are more likely to die from severe malnutrition if they don’t get lifesaving treatment. Breastfeeding also acts as a baby’s first vaccine, protecting them from common childhood illnesses.

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months not only promotes sensory and cognitive development of the child but also promotes emotional bonding between the mother and baby. During the first 6 months, the child needs only mother’s milk, not even water.

As infants turn six-month-old, their nutritional requirement increases. Besides breast milk, they need complementary foods for increased nutrient requirement. If complementary foods are not introduced at the right age, that is on completion of six months, an infant’s growth may falter. In order to meet infants’ nutritional needs, complementary food should be timely, adequate, safe & hygienic and properly fed. It is important to be responsive to the child’s cues for hunger and encouraging baby to eat. Along with nutritional intervention, timely vaccination is indispensable for health and wellbeing of children. The parents and family should be vigilant and responsive to the needs of the growing child.

Policy formation therefore considers multiple components like health, nutrition, and psychosocial stimulation for promotion of early childhood development in order to provide children a good start to life by focusing on the first 1000 days.

The Government of Gujarat and UNICEF are committed to prioritizing investing in breastfeeding support programmes- as part of a minimum package of health and nutrition interventions. It is also working to equip healthcare workforce with the skills they need to provide quality counseling and practical support to mothers to successfully breastfeed.

This World Breastfeeding Week, UNICEF is calling on all stakeholders including civil society and the private sector to step up efforts to protect, promote and support breastfeeding by:

* Informing people about their role in strengthening the warm chain of support for breastfeeding. A warm chain of support creates an enabling environment that empowers all women/parents to breastfeed optimally.
* Galvanizing action on strengthening capacity of actors and systems for transformational change around appropriate breastfeeding practices.
* Protecting caregivers and health care workers from the unethical marketing influence of the formula industry by fully adopting and implementing the International Code of Marketing of Breast milk Substitutes.
* Implementing family - friendly policies that provide all mothers with time, space and support to breastfeed. This includes providing at least 18 weeks of paid maternity leave to working mothers. For many mothers, the return to work is a barrier to breastfeeding their babies and providing the best possible nutrition.

World breastfeeding week serves as a reminder for us to ensure that breastfeeding mothers are supported every day of the year. It is indeed a collective responsibility of families and communities, and not of mothers alone. This is further supported by friendly policies and programmes, support from healthcare providers, and at the workplace that enables mothers to successfully breastfeed a child and gives them the best start in life.

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