



Circles of Support



Jenny Perez-Genge, LLL Leader, Thailand

When a breastfeeding mother faces stressful situations out of her control, such as natural disasters, war or family crisis, nurturing her children can be altered completely. However, starting to breastfeed or continuing to breastfeed can help sustain her own physical and emotional well-being, as well as her family's.

In wartimes and natural disasters, international relief organizations support the most vulnerable persons, such as breastfeeding mothers, their babies and small children. These organizations provide food, water, clothing and shelter where mothers can breastfeed their babies. Many mothers find that the only food available for their babies is their own breast milk.

These organizations also help by NOT promoting the use of formula, bottles or baby food, or accepting donations

of these items. Given the water and hygiene conditions in disaster situations, formula feeding is very risky.

In emergency situations, people worry about maternal malnutrition or are concerned that stress can reduce milk production. In fact, even a malnourished mother is capable of breastfeeding. She needs food, additional liquids, and most importantly, support and encouragement to nurse her baby frequently. Stress can affect the flow temporarily, so allowing the baby to nurse freely will help recover the normal flow. It is key to facilitate a safe environment, a breastfeeding room, a space for small children to play in, and provide opportunities for women to support each other.

After Hurricane Mitch hit Guatemala and Honduras in 1998, LLL Leaders*** in Guatemala visited shelters and spoke to mothers about breastfeeding benefits, especially as a means of preventing respiratory and intestinal infections stemming from contaminated water and lack of hygiene. LLL Honduras obtained grants to set up day care

Response to Crisis or Emergency

centers in flood affected areas, which provided income to women whose husbands lost their jobs with the devastation of the banana plantations.

In Japan, the 2004 typhoon flood and subsequent earthquake caused high levels of stress in breastfeeding mothers who reported problems with breastfeeding. LLL Leaders prepared publications and answered phone calls and e-mails from women who were looking for help because of what they felt was insufficient milk supply and inhibited let-down reflex. The main message given to these women was: “Keep breastfeeding!”

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the USA coastline and left thousands of displaced people. The response from LLL groups across the country created a wave of solidarity with coordinated efforts for collecting, storing and distributing donations of clothing, toys and household items. In addition, LLL Leaders helped mothers to overcome breastfeeding difficulties. Moreover, LLLI gave replacement sets of breastfeeding handbooks, informational material and office supplies to Leaders and administrative personnel affected by the hurricane.

A mother from Mississippi recounts that during and after the Hurricane, breastfeeding her two children (6 months and 3 years old) helped them survive and find comfort in each other: “My exclusively breastfed baby stayed hydrated in the sweltering heat. I did not have to worry about mixing formula at a time when we could not shower or flush a toilet”. Then she adds: “My three-year-old decided to nurse again for that brief time, and we were able to share that comfort.”

After the devastating earthquake in China in May 2008, LLL Leaders translated and prepared information about breastfeeding in emergency situations and mothers’ stories to share

with women in Sichuan, one of the most affected places.

When a traumatic situation or medical crisis disturbs the daily dynamics of home life, breastfeeding can help the family as a whole to ease the difficult time.

A mother in the Dominican Republic, actively involved in LLL DR, related that when her daughter was eight months old, the baby’s grandfather passed away, causing commotion at home. However, the mother knew that breastfeeding can unite and give comfort not only to the breastfeeding mother and baby, but to the whole family. She recalls: “For my husband, those little moments when the three of us would lay down while my daughter nursed, were a remedy that helped him pass through this hard time.” LLL encourages mothers to continue breastfeeding, as the hormones released during breastfeeding alleviate anxiety and calm both mother and baby.

An LLL Leader from Mexico, with experience in diverse techniques of pain and anxiety management, describes retrospectively how she was able to support families of the victims from a mine explosion and how she helped a mother who was having breastfeeding problems. The work of LLL Leaders in emergency or crisis situations implies the qualities of empathy, careful listening and loving guidance. These qualities are valuable in any helping situation, but become particularly important when dealing with mothers who are scared, nervous or anxious. LLL Leaders know the value of breastfeeding in any situation.

****A La Leche League Leader is a mother who has breastfed her own baby for about a year or longer and who has done additional reading and training to be accredited by La Leche League. She draws not only on her own experience but on the wealth of information and evidence in her LLL resources.*



The LLLI Mission

To help mothers worldwide to breastfeed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information and education, and to promote a better understanding of breastfeeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and mother.

La Leche League International is a globally recognized, not-for-profit organization that maintains a presence in more than 68 countries. Since 1956, over 43,000 women have become accredited Leaders who assist other women who want to breastfeed their babies. For breastfeeding information, to find a LLL Leader or LLL Group in your area, or to order materials, visit <http://www.llli.org> or call 800-LALECHE.



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