

Educated mothers are turning their backs on health visitors

The biggest UK survey of its kind has revealed that middle-class mothers disregard advice given to them by health visitors about feeding their babies.

PRESS RELEASE

Mothers are turning their backs on professional advice given to them about feeding their babies. Results just released from research carried out by nutritionist Jo Travers earlier this year show that many mothers were sceptical of state-sponsored guidance from health visitors, preferring to access advice from the Internet.

The majority of mothers involved in the survey were educated to degree level or higher and had a household income of above £41,000pa. Many of the sample felt that they were being given inaccurate or contradictory information and this led to a general mistrust of advice from health visitors.

The aim of the study was to explore the importance placed on various influences on complementary-feeding practices. Quantitative data taken from the *largest nationwide survey ever undertaken into the degree that influencing factors affect complementary-feeding decisions* shows that almost 60% of mothers did not value advice from health visitors rating it as “not very important” or “not important at all”.

Health visitors are provided by the state to every mother following the birth of their baby. The Department of Health in its 2010 white paper *Healthy lives, Healthy people* has committed to increase the number of health visitors by an extra 4,200 by April 2015 at an estimated cost of £577m. With mothers discounting their advice however, this raises the question, is it worth it?

Babies of complementary-feeding age are in a critical stage of development yet most mothers act against official recommendations.

“I received quite a bit of contradictory advice from health visitors, who did not themselves seem to know the guidelines.” - p131

“Generally the health professional[s] in primary care don't seem very well informed, unfortunately, and their advice seems to be based on personal experience rather than research” - p109

“Health visitors had very outdated and unflexible [sic] knowledge [...] so when I was introducing solids I didn't even ask for advice” - p124

Jo Travers says: “We found that many people felt that they were being given inaccurate information from health care professionals, which damaged their credibility and led to a lack of confidence in advice from official sources. This ultimately drove these educated mothers towards potentially unreliable information from books and the Internet.”

Notes for editors:

Jo Travers is a practising, evidence-based registered Dietitian with a First Class BSc (Hons) degree in Human Nutrition & Dietetics from London Metropolitan University. Her experience in the field includes time working in the NHS throughout London as well as four years in private practice. She is the author of two recipe books and is available for interview.

Jo can be contacted via 07540 305699 or jo@thelondonnutritionist.co.uk or @LDNnutritionist or www.thelondonnutritionist.co.uk

Methodology: The survey, a specific electronic questionnaire, was completed by 133 participants who had been recruited via a well-known online parenting forum. A second arm of the survey, with 10 participants, was conducted face-to-face at a baby clinic in southeast London. Frequency tables and chi-squared tests were used to analyse categorical data, and thematic analysis was carried out on qualitative data. A Likert scale was used when canvassing opinions. Ethics approval was granted by London Metropolitan University. Please contact Jo Travers to read the entire paper.

###