

# Making Sense of Breastfeeding Designations

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From earliest human history, women have breastfed with the help of other women. Dana Raphael, PhD in her classic work Breastfeeding: The Tender Gift identified a major factor in breastfeeding success as the presence of a supportive person, a doula. A doula is needed, she points out, to enhance mothering skills and to provide confidence, breastfeeding information and nurturing.

With the rapid decline in breastfeeding practices in industrialized countries after World War II, mother to daughter, woman to woman and cultural knowledge of breastfeeding declined as well. An interim solution has been formal mother-to-mother support systems such as La Leche League and Nursing Mother Council as well as increased professional knowledge.

The World Health Organization and UNICEF have classified breastfeeding management training programs into two categories depending on the length of the in-class learning time. Courses either fit into the 18 hour or the 40 hour category. An 18 hour course is required for each maternal-child health staff member in a Baby-Friendly Hospital. An 18 hour course is commonly given for WIC peer counselors as well. At the 40 hour level, more depth and complexity is possible. There are several designations used for people who complete the 40 hour courses, as well as various homework or testing qualifications. The Certified Lactation Counselor (CLC), a 45 hour course taught by Healthy Children Project's Center for Breastfeeding, fits into the 40 hour category and has an Exam administered by the Academy of Lactation Policy and Practice (ALPP) to evaluate learning. This course has been offered since the late 1970's. Other courses fit into the 40 hour designation as well. The International designation, IBCLC, requires 45 hours of classroom as well as unsupervised practice hours before taking their exam. The IBCLC 45 hour requirement can be fulfilled in many different ways: one day courses, several hour courses, or one long course adding up to 45 hours.

It is also important to recognize that none of the breastfeeding designations allow people to practice or do anything differently. None of the designations are clinical specialties or conveys an expanded role - only that the person has additional training. In other words, a non-medically trained person with additional breastfeeding knowledge designation (CLC, IBCLC, CLE, CLS etc.) does not have an expanded role such as a nurse practitioner; a nutritionist still does not touch breasts, a nurse does not prescribe as a result of any lactation designation. The IBCLC exam as well as the CLC conveys minimal competencies in technical knowledge, not clinical specialization.

Nearly three million women will choose to begin breastfeeding in the United States this year. Very few will have a rewarding and fulfilling experience unless they have access to competent help. Training programs for breastfeeding support people is a way to increase knowledge and competency.

In the Report of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Breastfeeding and Human Lactation, which was published in 1994, strategies were suggested including:

It is imperative for all health care professionals to receive adequate didactic training and clinical training in lactation and breastfeeding and to develop skills in patient education and the management breastfeeding...

...The health-care system needs to be better informed and more clearly supportive of lactation and breastfeeding.

The 2000 Health and Human Services Blueprint for Action on Breastfeeding call for the United States to:

Train health care professionals who provide maternal and child care on the basics of lactation, breastfeeding counseling, and lactation management during coursework, clinic and in-service training, and continuing education.

Ensure that breastfeeding mothers have access to comprehensive, up-to-date, and culturally tailored lactation services provided by trained physicians, nurses, lactation consultants, and nutritionist/dietitians.

Develop social support and information resources for breastfeeding women such as hotlines, peer counseling and mother-to-mother support groups.

Once all health professionals receive training as part of the formal curriculum of their respective schools and breastfeeding becomes the cultural norm, these designations will be superfluous.

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