

ATTITUDES OF FUTURE MOTHERS REGARDING INFANT FEEDING

**Manorama Verma
Vandana Saini
Tejinder Singh**

ABSTRACT

Attitudes of 2500 urban college girls from Ludhiana city, aged 15 to 20 years were assessed towards infant feeding using a standardized Likert Scale ($r = 0.52$). The influence of subject opted in college and the presence of a child less than 3 years in the family on the attitudes was also studied. The overall attitudes of the whole group towards infant feeding were negative. Science students had better attitude scores on most of the themes tested ($p < 0.05$). The presence of a child aged less than 3 years in the family had no significant influence on the attitudes of girls towards infant feeding. Most of the girls were desirous of studying the concepts of infant feeding in their college curriculum. It is recommended that efforts should be made to incorporate these concepts in the formal educational curriculum so that girls grow up with positive attitude towards infant feeding.

Keywords: *Attitudes, Likert Scale, Infant Feeding, Urban college girls.*

From the Department of Pediatrics, Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, Punjab.

Reprint requests: Dr. Manorama Verma, Professor and Head, Department of Pediatrics, Christian Medical College, Ludhiana 141 008.

*Received for publication: July 14, 1994;
Accepted: October 4, 1994*

The infant feeding practices have their roots in ill-defined socio-cultural pattern, religious beliefs, superstitions and taboos prevalent in a community. The knowledge is passed down the generations from mothers to daughters and by observation of ladies in the community. However, mere acquisition of knowledge does not guarantee that it will be effectively utilized. Attitudes have a very important role to play in determining whether the knowledge is applied or not.

Unfortunately attitudes have remained the 'Cinderella' of health educators. Out of over hundred studies reviewed by us on attitudes regarding infant feeding, not one has assessed attitudes using standard accepted scientific methodology which has been described earlier(1). No wonder that most health education programmes remain localized to the level of imparting knowledge. No attempt is made to either assess attitudes or change them, with the result that the beneficiaries fail to transform the knowledge into actual practice.

Adolescent girls offer a concentrated, easily approachable group who are receptive to change and any effort directed on this particular group is likely to generate benefits in far greater proportions than those applied on women with fixed attitudes. With this background, the present study was conducted to assess the attitudes of urban college girls so that suitable educative interventions can be planned.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted on 2500 urban college girls aged 15 to 20 years in Ludhiana city. The attitudes were

assessed by means of a standardized pretested and pre-validated Likert type scale. Our scale had a reliability of 0.82 as tested on 50 randomly chosen girls from the same population. The statements were scored by a computer using the scoring system already described earlier(2) and the attitudes of the girls towards various aspects of infant feeding were analyzed as a whole and also under the following categories: (i) Subject opted in college, viz., Arts, Science, Homescience, Commerce; and (ii) Presence or otherwise of a child less than 3 years of age in the household. The average scores were calculated for each category and the intergroup differences were tested for significance using the Student T test(3).

The data was further analyzed by clubbing statements in the scale on the following basic themes—prelacteal feeds, breastfeeding, bottle feeding, top feeding, weaning, hot and cold foods and desirability of teaching these concepts in the college curriculum.

Results

The respondents were from diverse strata of population and had opted for Arts (1407, 56.7%), Science (n=467, 18.5%), Homescience (n=276, 11.4%) and Commerce (n=354, 14.1%) in their studies. The number of girls who had a child less than 3 years of age in the family was 779 (36.16%).

The attitude score of the total group towards infant feeding was 1.93, which was towards the negative side. The breakup of score depending on the subject opted by the respondents has been shown in *Table I*. The mean attitude scores of all categories of respondents

TABLE I—Attitude Scores in Relation to Subject

	Attitude score	p value
Attitudes of total group	1.92	— —
1. Arts	1.92	1 & 2 = <0.01*
2. Science	1.97	1 & 3 = <0.01*
3. Home science	1.96	1 & 4 = <0.05*
4. Commerce	1.94	2 & 3 = > 0.05 2 & 4 = < 0.01* 3 & 4 = > 0.05

* Significant

were negative. There was no significant difference in the attitudes towards infant feeding between the group who had a child less than three years in the family and that which did not (attitude score 1.94 vs 1.95; $p > 0.05$). The details of scores based on particular theme tested have been shown in *Table II*. Attitudes towards breastfeeding and desirability of teaching infant feeding concepts in college were positive, while for the rest of the items they were negative. On analyzing the data further, it was observed that in general, science students had better attitude scores compared to arts and commerce students on most of the themes tested and the differences was more marked in relation to weaning and concepts of hot and cold foods.

When the scores were analyzed depending on the presence of a child less than 3 years in the family or otherwise, no significant difference was apparent except in the attitude towards bottle feeding, where the former group had more negative attitude than the latter group (1.67 vs 1.79; $p < 0.01$).

TABLE II—Details of Theme Tested

Theme tested	Groups according to subjects opted in college	
	Science + Home-science	Arts + Commerce
Prelacteal feeding	1.97	1.93
Breastfeeding	1.98	1.88*
Bottle feeding	2.2	2.18
Top feeding	1.76	1.76
Weaning	1.84	1.78*
Concepts of hot and cold foods	1.61	1.48*
Desirability of inclusion of concepts of infant feeding in college curriculum	2.66	2.62

Discussion

Attitudes are a learned predisposition to act favorably or unfavorably towards a person or object and can, therefore, be changed, favorably or otherwise, by providing right conditions(4). Thus it is the attitudes which decide how acquired knowledge is ultimately going to be put into practice. There is a growing realization and awareness that as educators we should be as much concerned with the development of positive attitudes as with imparting knowledge(1).

The present study, which was undertaken to assess the attitudes of Urban college girls towards infant feeding showed that all the girls had negative

attitudes towards infant feeding. This was more so amongst the arts and commerce group. The science and homescience group of girls had slightly better attitudes especially towards breastfeeding, weaning, and concept regarding hot and cold foods. This was probably because these subjects do include some knowledge regarding nutrition and also that probably these girls are better exposed to such knowledge through scientific magazines. This indicates that teaching of the concepts of infant nutrition could change the attitudes of the other girls also positively.

Observing the upbringing of a young child in the family is expected to influence the attitudes of the girls significantly and hence this aspect was included in the present study. However, on most of the themes tested, there was no significant difference between the attitudes of girls who had such a child in the family and those who did not. The attitude towards bottle feeding was affected negatively by the presence of a young child in the family. We attributed this to the common practice of bottle feeding in most homes and the fact that it is not necessary that all bottle fed babies have problems.

One important observation was that irrespective of the category they belonged to, all the girls were in favor of being taught about infant feeding as a part of their college curriculum. We found this very encouraging as it shows the receptivity of the girls to the idea of teaching infant nutrition to them. These adolescent girls are the future mothers, and if they have positive attitudes from the beginning, it will go a long way in realizing the ultimate goal of improving

the nutritional status of our children. As the awareness of importance of female education is coming in our society, more and more girls are going to schools and colleges. These girls are thus exposed to a wider environment and learn a lot from it. Not only personal interactions between girls of different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds but also other influences like television, books, magazines, and teaching in schools and colleges contribute towards their awareness.

Based on these observations we recommend that the educational curriculum should be revised to include various aspects of infant nutrition and that some time should be earmarked not only for science and homescience students but for all girls attending college.

Informal talks between students and teachers during tutorial sessions to emphasize the correct concepts of infant nutrition would have a significant impact in forming positive attitudes.

REFERENCES

1. Verma M, Singh T. Designing attitude scales: Theoretical considerations. *Indian Pediatr* 1993, 30:1369-1371.
2. Verma M, Saini V, Singh T. Developing and standardizing a scale for measuring attitudes towards infant feeding. *Indian Pediatr* 1993,30:1303-1308.
3. Best JW, Kahn JV. *Research in Education*. New Delhi, Prentice Hall of India, 1992, pp 160-163.
4. Morgan CL. *A Brief Introduction to Psychology*, 2nd edn. New Delhi, Tata McGraw Hill, T988, 378-383.