

Social stigmas against breast-feeding may contribute to African-American college students' hesitation

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African-American mothers breast-feed their children at lower rates than Caucasian, Latina and Asian mothers. This difference often has been attributed to socio-demographic factors such as age, income, education and personal experience with breast-feeding. Now, a researcher at the University of Missouri has discovered that African-American college students are aware of the benefits of breast-feeding for infants, yet some still are hesitant about breast-feeding future children. Evidence revealed a lack of public acceptance toward breast-feeding may influence this hesitation.

"We need to start early with our breast-feeding education and exposure because women decide before they have [children](#) whether or not they will breast-feed," Urmeka Jefferson, assistant professor at the Sinclair School of Nursing, said. "We need to figure out how to encourage positive breast-feeding attitudes among young Black women and make them aware that breast-feeding is the normal, natural infant-feeding method."

Jefferson surveyed African-American college students about their attitudes and exposure to breast-feeding and their intent to breast-feed future children. She found the majority of students knew the benefits of breast-feeding and had some level of previous exposure, such as friends or parents who had breast-fed their infants. Despite their knowledge of the benefits of breast-feeding, many students felt formula-feeding was

more convenient and a better choice if the mother worked outside the home. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed also expressed discomfort at the idea of breast-feeding in public places, such as a restaurant. Jefferson concluded that this discomfort may have less to do with racial or socio-demographic disparities and more to do with social stigmas against breast-feeding.

"Encouraging [public acceptance](#) of breast-feeding is important," Jefferson said. "Our American culture tends to add a sexual connotation to breast-feeding that is false, and we have to do more to change social perceptions so that women feel more comfortable breast-feeding in public. If we can get the message out to women and men before they have children, we'll have more parents who are knowledgeable about breast-feeding and intend to breast-feed their children."

Mothers choosing to breast-feed despite the negative social attitude surrounding it demonstrate a stronger intention and desire to do what is beneficial for their infants and themselves, Jefferson said. Children who are breast-fed are more resistant to disease and infection, while mothers who breast-feed are less likely to develop postpartum depression and breast cancer, Jefferson said.

Jefferson received the National Association of Neonatal Nurses research abstract award for her study, titled "Contribution of Breast-feeding Exposure and Attitudes to Breast-feeding Intentions of Black College Students." Previously, the full study, "Attitudes, subjective norms, and intentions regarding infant feeding methods among black college students," was published in the *Western Journal of Nursing Research*. In her future research, Jefferson hopes to identify the specific factors that may influence African-American women's decisions to breast-feed their infants.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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