

Study examines prenatal investments, breastfeeding and birth order

February 3 2015, by William G. Gilroy



Many mothers can relate to the experience of having hundreds of pictures of their first-born child, but far fewer of their younger children. A new study by University of Notre Dame economist Kasey Buckles finds that those younger children often get less attention in other ways as well.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979 Child and Young Adult Survey, which provides detailed information on pre- and postnatal behaviors of women, Buckles and fellow researcher Shawna Kolka investigated differences in investments in health and in the incidence of breastfeeding by birth order.

"Our main finding is that, on average, mothers are less likely to make certain investments in their later-born children before and soon after they are born," she said. "For example, mothers are 15 percent less likely to breastfeed a second-born child than a first and are 21 percent less likely to breastfeed a fourth or higher-order child. They are also less likely to take prenatal vitamins and seek prenatal care for their later-born [children](#)."

Buckles notes that she doesn't yet know the key factors that make mothers less likely to invest in higher order births. However, she offers some possible causes.

"Some possibilities are that resources like time and money are more constrained for higher-order births," she said. "It may also be that mothers learn things in earlier births that affect their later decisions."

Regardless of the key factors at work, Buckles feels that the research offers important suggestions for health providers.

"We believe that these results are important for providers as they identify high [birth order](#) as a risk factor for under-investment in maternal or child health and well-being," she said. "Providers may want to emphasize the importance of [prenatal vitamins](#), early [prenatal care](#), breastfeeding and other behaviors to their higher-order patients."

The study appears in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*.

More information: Kasey Buckles, Shawna Kolka, "Prenatal investments, breastfeeding, and birth order," *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 118, October 2014, Pages 66-70, ISSN 0277-9536, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.07.055

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