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June 21, 2019

# Mothers, Fathers, and Other Caregivers Seek Options in Infant Feeding

Report on bipartisan survey

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A new bipartisan poll<sup>1</sup> explores the driving factors behind mothers', fathers' and other caregivers' infant feeding decisions and their choices to breastfeed, feed formula, or use a combination of the two. It finds that those who do choose formula largely do so out of necessity, either because of concerns about milk production, lack of support at work or because the birth mother simply is not available. Many mothers<sup>2</sup> who breastfeed, or want to do so, report physiological barriers and lack of support.

With these realities as a backdrop, most mothers, fathers, and other caregivers want easy-to-understand and science-based infant feeding education and oppose government restrictions on information about healthy infant feeding options like infant formula. Many also reject limiting access to infant formula in hospitals. Ultimately, the vast majority of mothers, fathers and other caregivers want to make their own decisions based on what is best for them and their baby.

This new poll builds on two polls of mothers previously conducted by the same team in 2009 and 2012.<sup>3</sup> The survey also included for the first time a broader sample of those in charge of infants' care, including fathers, grandparents, relatives of the infant, or others involved in feeding. It also

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<sup>1</sup> GQR and Public Opinion Strategies conducted a poll of mothers and caregivers that fielded from February 27 to March 11, 2019. The sample of mothers who had given birth in the last 12 months was conducted mostly online (n=800), with a few cell phone interviews (n=2); demographic controls based on the American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau of mothers who had a birth in the last 12 months were used to ensure representation. The sample of 400 caregivers was also conducted online; caregivers were defined as spending more than 30 hours per week caring for an infant under 12 months old, outside of commercial day care.

<sup>2</sup> Where the report refers to "mothers," it refers to mothers who gave birth to an infant within the last 12 months.

<sup>3</sup> GQR conducted a poll of n=876 mothers who had given birth in the last 12 months that fielded from May 17-28, 2009, and again with n=1,001 mothers, including an oversample of n=210 Hispanic mothers, from August 8 – September 3, 2012. The 2019 research is the first to include a broader category of caregivers that takes into account fathers, grandparents and other relatives who provide significant caregiving.

expanded its scope to all birth mothers of infants (rather than just those who delivered healthy full-term infants without any medical issues).

## Key findings

- **Mothers, fathers, and other caregivers understand the benefits of breastfeeding.** A large majority of mothers (75%) and fathers and other caregivers (66%) know breastfeeding is healthier for their babies. These majorities also reflect previous survey results.
- **A majority of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers feed their baby at least some breast milk and, for many, the feeding approach is dynamic.** Before their baby reaches six months old, 40% of mothers report breastfeeding exclusively, up slightly since 2012, and 76% feed their baby some breastmilk, either exclusively or supplemented with formula. Among fathers and other caregivers, 71% feed their baby at least some breastmilk in the first six months. Most do not change their feeding habits within the baby's first 6 months – only 26% of mothers and 14% of fathers/other caregivers reported changing what their infant was first fed.
- **Mothers, fathers, and other caregivers turn to health professionals and government sources for information.** Eighty-nine percent of mothers and 87% of fathers/other caregivers say their pediatrician is an important source for information about feeding their baby; another 81% of mothers say their own doctor or OBGYN is an important source. These health professionals, along with lactation consultants, top the list of most important resources – followed by government outreach via a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinic or websites like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Health and Human Services (HHS) or state departments of health.
- **Majorities of mothers and fathers/other caregivers believe the government should provide easy-to-understand and science-based information and resources beyond just breastfeeding.** By a 2 to 1 margin, mothers and caregivers believe “the government should provide information and resources on a variety of healthy ways parents and caregivers can feed infants, including breastfeeding and infant formula feeding,” rather than “the government should only promote breastfeeding.” And a strong majority – 82% of moms and 78% of fathers/other caregivers – believes hospitals should provide information about both breastfeeding and infant formula feeding methods.
- **Many mothers report both physiological and social barriers to breastfeeding.** Consistent with previous surveys, moms who move from breastfeeding to formula feeding tend to do so because they were not producing enough milk, faced physical problems breastfeeding, or at their doctor's recommendation. However, there are also other challenges: 72% of mothers

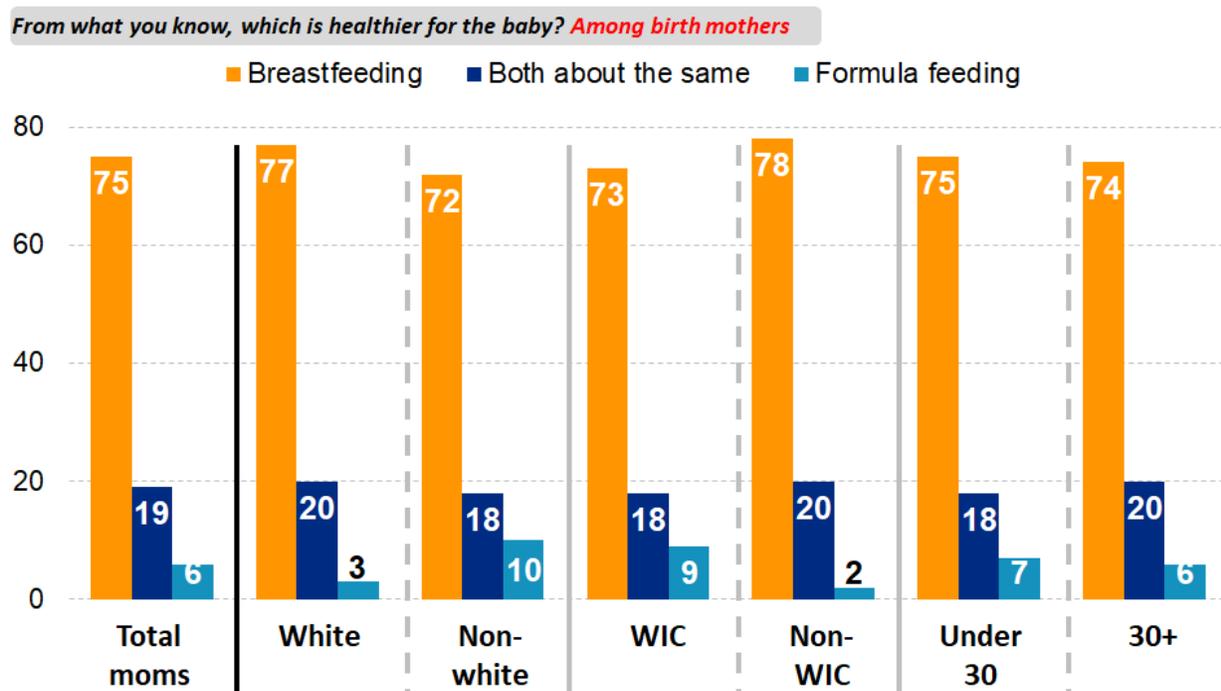
say not having time to pump at work creates a barrier to breastfeeding; 71% say just returning to work or school is a barrier; 67% say employers not supporting pumping at work is a barrier.

- **Ultimately, most mothers, fathers, and other caregivers say it should be their choice how to feed their baby.** A majority of mothers (61%) and fathers/other caregivers (52%) feel judged for their feeding choices – yet a strong majority of both groups (89% of mothers and 83% of fathers/other caregivers), believe this is their own personal decision.

### Mothers: breastfeeding more; want options

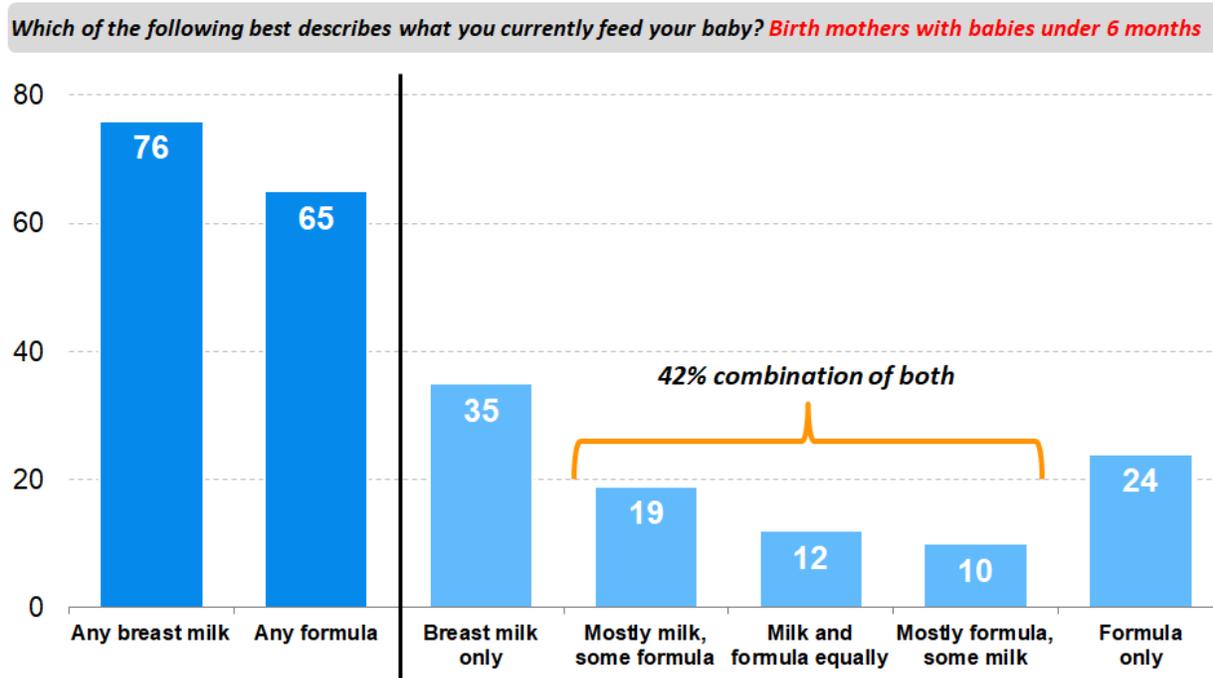
Mothers know the benefits of breastfeeding. Three quarters of these moms say breastfeeding is healthier; only 6% think formula feeding is the healthier option (another 19% say both equally). This knowledge cuts across race, socio-economic status, and age. Across all demographic groups, majorities of mothers know breastmilk is best for their babies. [Figure 1]

Figure 1: Mothers’ knowledge of breastfeeding benefits cuts across race, socio-economic status, and age



Seventy-six percent of mothers feed their baby breastmilk in some way in the first six months, either exclusively or together with infant formula, and a similar share report to use formula in some way to feed their baby as well. Taken together, 42% of mothers are using a mixture of both formula and breast milk to feed their baby in the first six months.

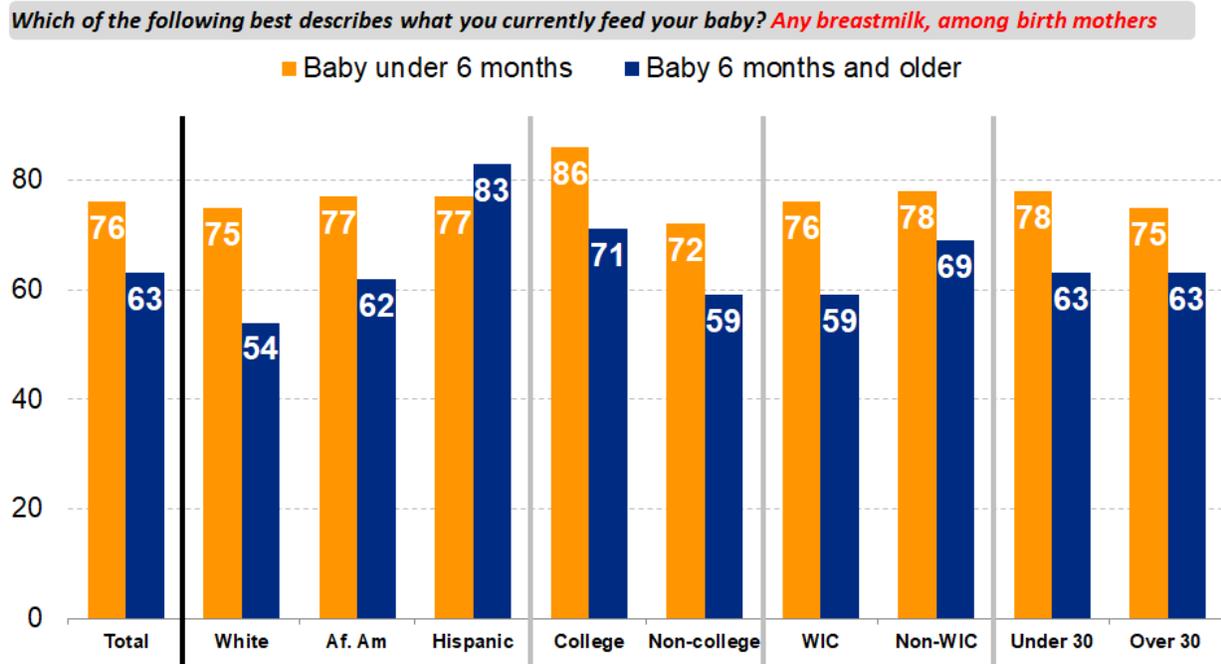
Figure 2: Most mothers fed at least some breast milk during first six months of infant’s life <sup>4</sup>



Most mothers feed their babies with a combination of breastmilk and infant formula. About a third breastfeed exclusively during the first six months of the baby’s life, in accordance with current medical recommendations. [Figure 2] That number falls after six months to 24% of mothers who are breastfeeding exclusively. There are some education and racial differences, with white and college-educated moms slightly more likely to breastfeed exclusively before six months. Still, 77% of African American mothers, 77% of Hispanic mothers and 72% of mothers without a college education feed their baby breast milk in some way in the first six months. [Figure 3]

<sup>4</sup> Throughout, totals may not appear to add due to rounding.

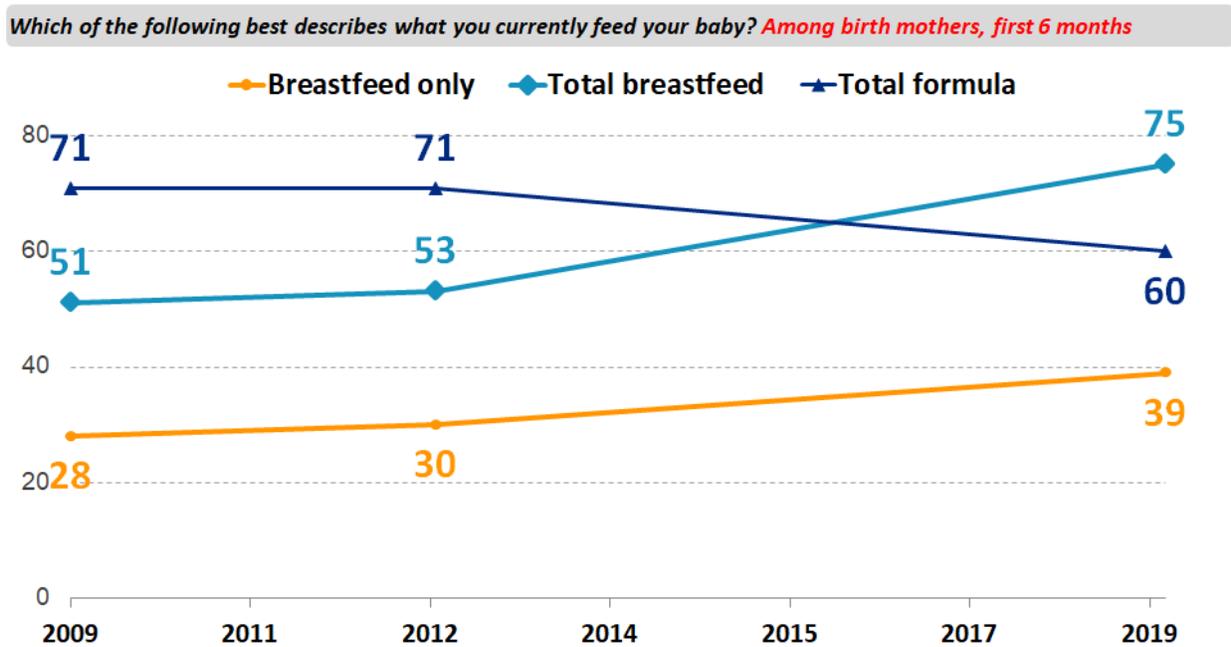
Figure 3: Mothers' feeding breastmilk cuts across demographic groups



Over time<sup>5</sup>, more mothers are choosing to breastfeed. The share that exclusively breastfeeds in the first six months has risen over 10 points in the last decade to about a third of moms; the share that breastfeed in some way in the first six months has grown by more than 20 points in the same period. [Figure 4]

<sup>5</sup> GQR and POS conducted polls of mothers in 2009 and 2012. While the methodology is different from the current poll (the previous polls were conducted via phone and all completed over landline) and the audience slightly different (moms and infants with medical conditions excluded), we draw a meaningful comparison by comparing the same groups (moms who gave birth to a single, non-premature infant without medical complications). In the current poll, mother was defined as the person who gave birth to the infant in the last 12 months.

Figure 3: Over time, rise in both exclusive and partial breastfeeding among mothers<sup>6</sup>



This increase in breastfeeding comes among mothers who previously were less likely to report exclusively breastfeeding. Twenty percent of WIC moms reported to breastfeed exclusively during the first six months in 2012, growing 15 points to 35% today. The number of mothers without a college education who exclusively breastfeed has grown as well, from 23% to 39%.

Mothers choose to breastfeed because they understand the health benefits. Many rely on professional, accredited sources for information. Overall, mothers’ top three most-valuable sources for information are their baby’s pediatrician, their own doctor or OBGYN, and a lactation consultant. Strong majorities of mothers say these sources are very or somewhat important, with near-majorities saying each is very important. Moms also value government sources like the WIC clinic, websites from the CDC or HHS, and their state’s department of health for information. [Figure 5]

<sup>6</sup> Comparison of surveys conducted in 2009, 2012, and 2019. All are filtered down to 2012 Universe for consistency, removing multiples, premature births, or reported medical conditions that prevent breastfeeding.

Figure 5: Mothers seek out professionals, government sources for infant feeding information<sup>7</sup>

**How important of a source is this for you when it comes to receiving information about feeding your baby? Birth mothers**

	Very important	Total important
Your baby's pediatrician	65	89
Your doctor or OBGYN	52	81
Lactation consultant	49	76
WIC website or clinic	43	66
Your family	38	69
Government websites like the CDC or HHS	32	59
Birth coach or doula	31	53
Your state's department of health website	26	54
Infant formula company materials	26	48
Your friends	22	55
Books or DVDs on pregnancy and maternity	22	52
The internet, YouTube videos, or podcasts	20	42
Social media	18	37
Magazines	14	32
Television and radio	14	32

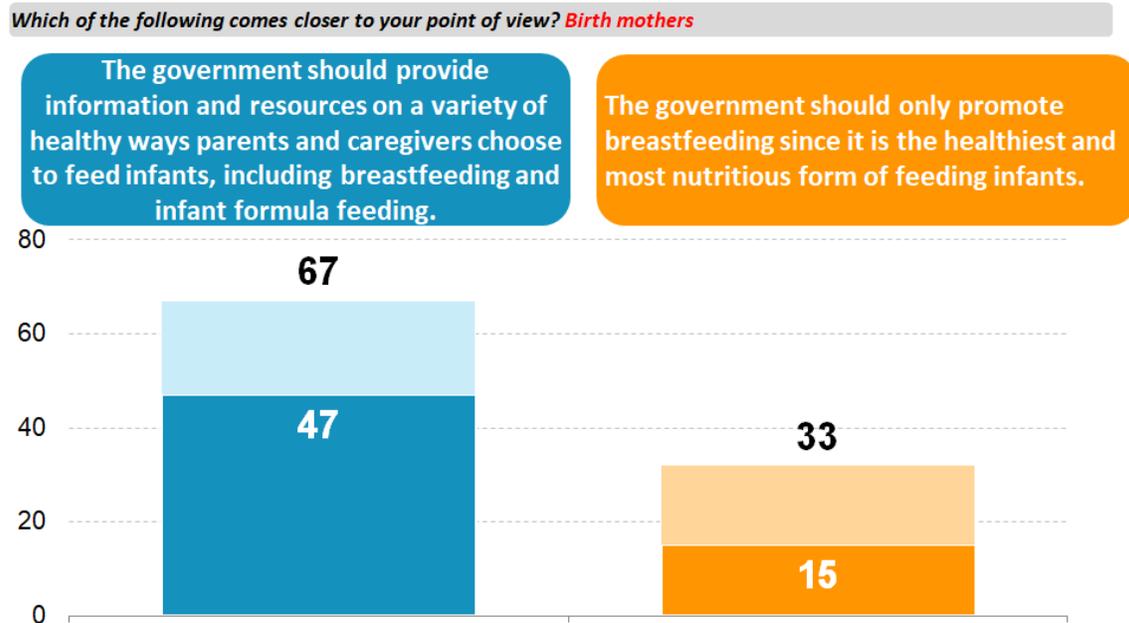
All told, nearly 90% of mothers feel they have the information they need to make a decision on how to feed their baby. Nearly two thirds make this decision before the baby is born.

There is little support for restricting information or attempts to influence feeding choices – even if done in the name of health. A 67% majority of mothers say “the government should provide information and resources on a variety of healthy ways parents and caregivers choose to feed infants, including breastfeeding and infant formula feeding” over the 33% who say “the government should only promote breastfeeding since it is the healthiest and most nutritious form of feeding infants.” [Figure 6]

More than half of mothers want information about feeding that is easy to understand, and about a third want that information to be based on science. There is a clear lane for translating scientific information into a format that is digestible for busy moms and caregivers.

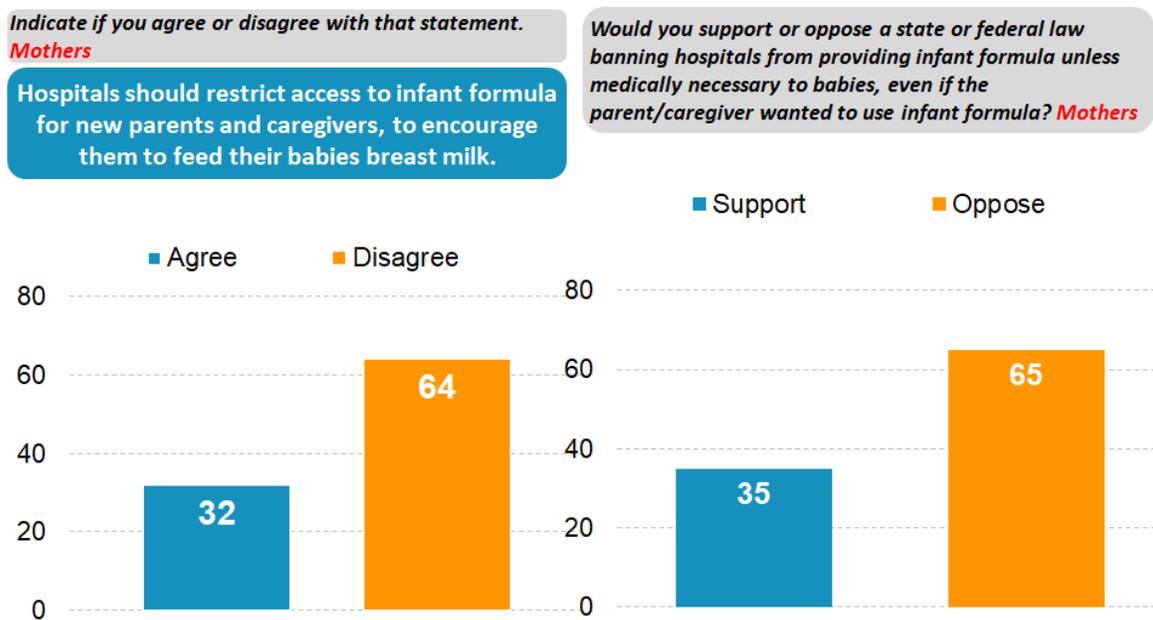
<sup>7</sup> In figure 5, column 2 (very important) shows respondents who identified the information source in column 1 as “Very Important.” Column 3 is a combination of respondents who identified the information source in column 1 as “Very Important” and “Somewhat Important” (not shown).

Figure 6: Majority of mothers support information on a variety of feeding choices



Further, 64% of mothers reject the idea that hospitals should restrict access to infant formula to encourage parents and caregivers to feed breastmilk, and 65% oppose laws that would ban hospitals from providing infant formula unless medically necessary. [Figure 7]

Figure 7: Majority of mothers reject restricting access to formula and oppose law banning provision of infant formula unless medically necessary



There is intensity to this opposition. In an open-ended question, a majority (61%) of mothers say their reaction would be negative if information about infant feeding from health care providers or the government were restricted to only information about breastfeeding. “Moms who can’t [breastfeed] are going to feel like failures,” says one. Another says:

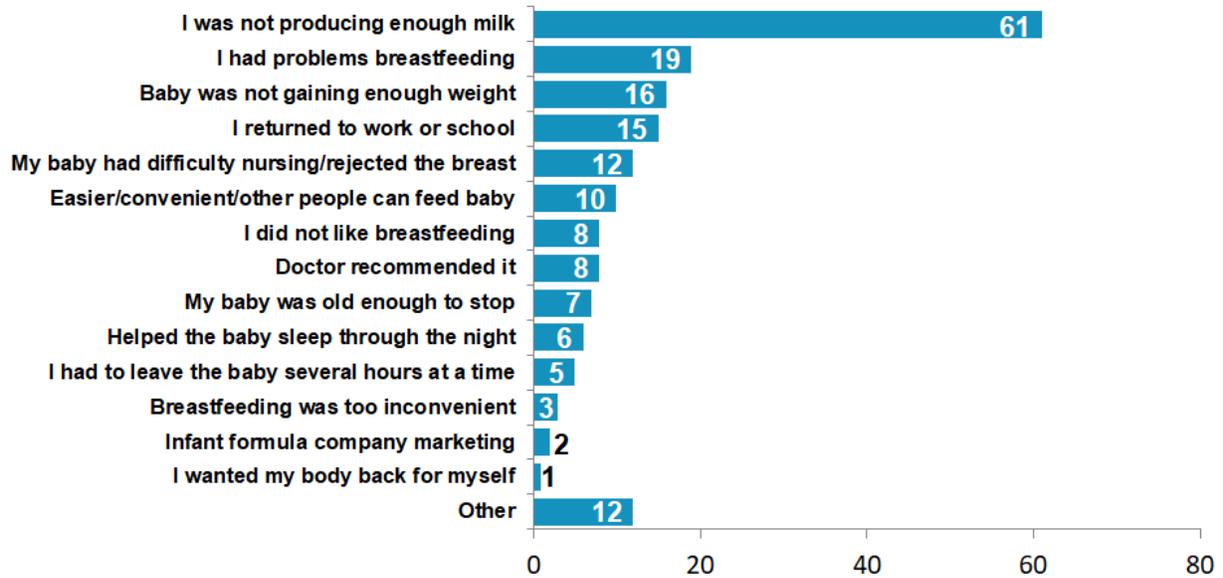
*“[I would feel] angry. Fed is BEST. Not every mother is capable of breastfeeding whether it’s a physical or mental inability. Some babies have latch issues or dietary sensitivities. If the breast is pushed to an extreme, mothers may feel inadequate about supply or ability to produce which can increase postpartum anxiety and depression.”*

Most mothers supplement with formula and many mothers change their milk feeding patterns as their babies grow. Thirty-nine percent of mothers currently feed both breastmilk and formula; 31% report to having changed feeding habits since their baby was born, a share that grows among moms of babies 6 months and older. The data suggest feeding decisions around breastfeeding and infant formula are truly dynamic, even at an early age, and continue to evolve as babies grow older.

Mothers who shift from breastmilk to formula do so for concerns about their infants getting enough to eat. Most mothers who report ceasing to breastfeed their baby say they have done so because they were not producing enough milk (61%), they had problems breastfeeding (19%), or that the baby was not gaining enough weight (16%). [Figure 8]

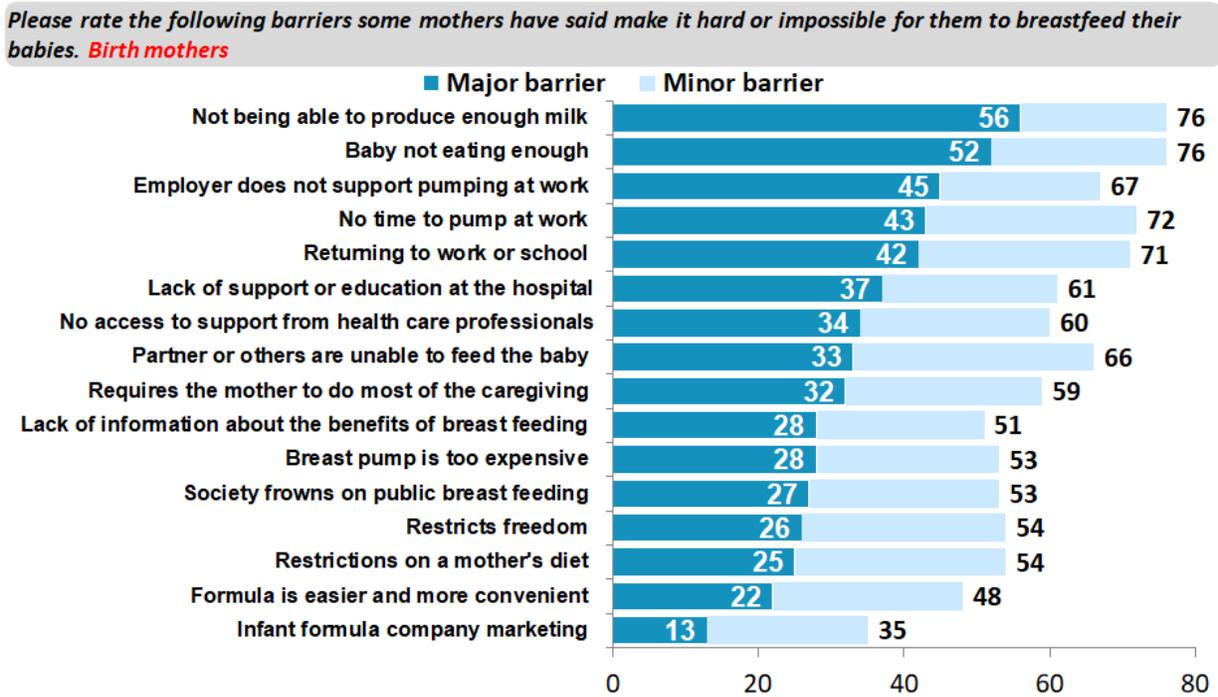
Figure 8: Mothers report not producing enough milk drives the decision to switch to formula

*From the options below, what would you say is the primary reason you stopped feeding your baby breast-milk? [up to 3 responses allowed] Birth mothers*



For many, concerns about producing enough milk is the major barrier to breastfeeding. But there are other hurdles. Seventy-two percent of mothers say not having time to pump at work creates a major or minor barrier to breastfeeding; 71% say just returning to work or school is a barrier; 67% say employers not supporting pumping at work is a barrier. Some also point to lack of support or education from health professionals. [Figure 9]

Figure 9: Milk production, questions of support as leading barriers to breastfeeding for mothers



Mothers face many pressures in their feeding decisions. This data confirms that fully 61% of mothers feel judged by others for the feeding choices they have made for their baby.

But ultimately, a strong majority – 89% – feels that it should be their decision how to feed their baby, and many believe the government should take this into consideration. “Consider the mother’s feelings,” says one mom, “Most mothers know what is best for their babies.” Another states: “It should be the mother’s decision and the information they provide should be factual and non-biased.” Another woman says: “It's the mother's decision and nobody should feel pressured to feed how others think they should. But [they] should also be given all the information they need to make their decision on how to feed their baby.”

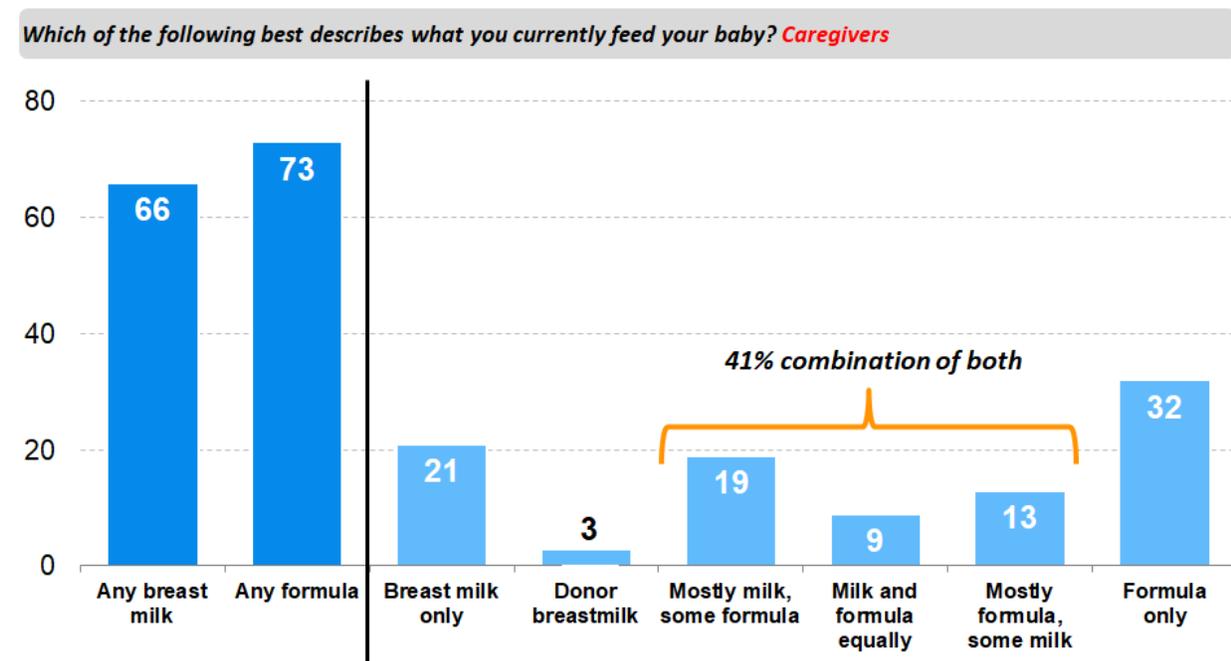
### Fathers and other caregivers: different circumstances from mothers, similar views

The caregiver sample was new to this poll – and is the first systematic look at attitudes among adults responsible for infants and their feeding who are not exclusively biological parents. Most of the caregivers sampled, 68%, report to be a non-parent relative of the baby; 11% are partners of the birth mother (about half of those male partners, and half female partners). Eight percent reported adopting their baby, either with a partner or individually. And 5% say their baby is a

foster child, and 3% from a surrogate birth. Caregivers in the poll were overwhelmingly female: 86% were women.

Despite these total differences, there are many similarities in how caregivers approach feeding choices. A majority, 66%, are feeding the baby breastmilk in some way – with 21% saying the baby consumes the mother’s breastmilk exclusively, and another 3% relying on donor breastmilk. Seventy-three percent of caregivers are feeding the baby infant formula in some way, with 32% saying they exclusively feed the baby formula. Fully 41% report using both breast milk and formula. [Figure 10]

Figure 10: Most caregivers feed at least some breast milk during the first six months of an infant’s life

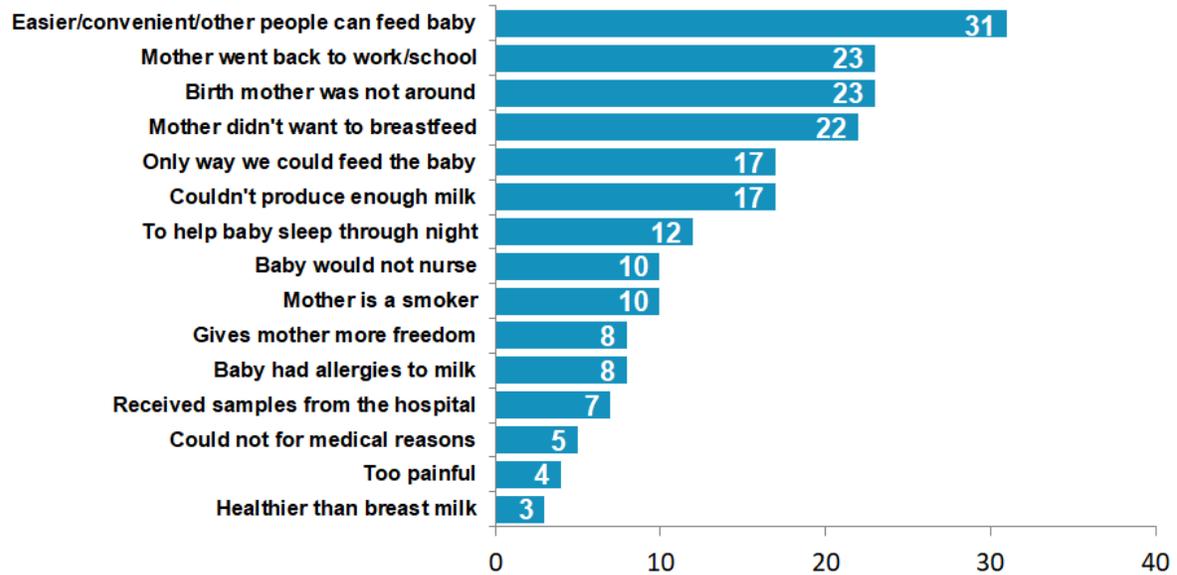


For caregivers, necessity largely drives the decision to use formula. Nearly half of caregivers who use formula say they do so because the mother is not around or went back to work or school; about a third say it allows for people other than the mother to feed the baby. And another 17% say it is the “only” way they can feed their baby. [Figure 11]

The poll results indicate a majority of mothers and caregivers who used infant formula were purchasing the product from a store, while 10% of mothers and 15% of caregivers were feeding infant formula not purchased from a store, which could include homemade infant formula. Homemade infant formula is not recommended; and in line with this, homemade or non-store bought infant formula was reported by 49% of mothers and 42% of caregivers to be “dangerous” or “risky.”

Figure 4: For many caregivers, formula feeding decision is out of necessity

*From the options below, what would you say is the primary reason you chose to feed your baby formula?*  
 [up to 3 responses allowed] **Caregivers**



As with mothers, a majority of fathers and other caregivers understand the health benefits of breastfeeding. Sixty-six percent know that breastfeeding is the healthiest feeding option. Many caregivers’ experience with the baby starts from day one – 62% say they were present at the hospital or birth center when the baby was born. While there, most receive information on feeding methods; of those present at the birth, 86% of caregivers say they were given information on feeding methods. Like mothers, caregivers trust medical professionals and official sources for feeding information. [Figure 12]

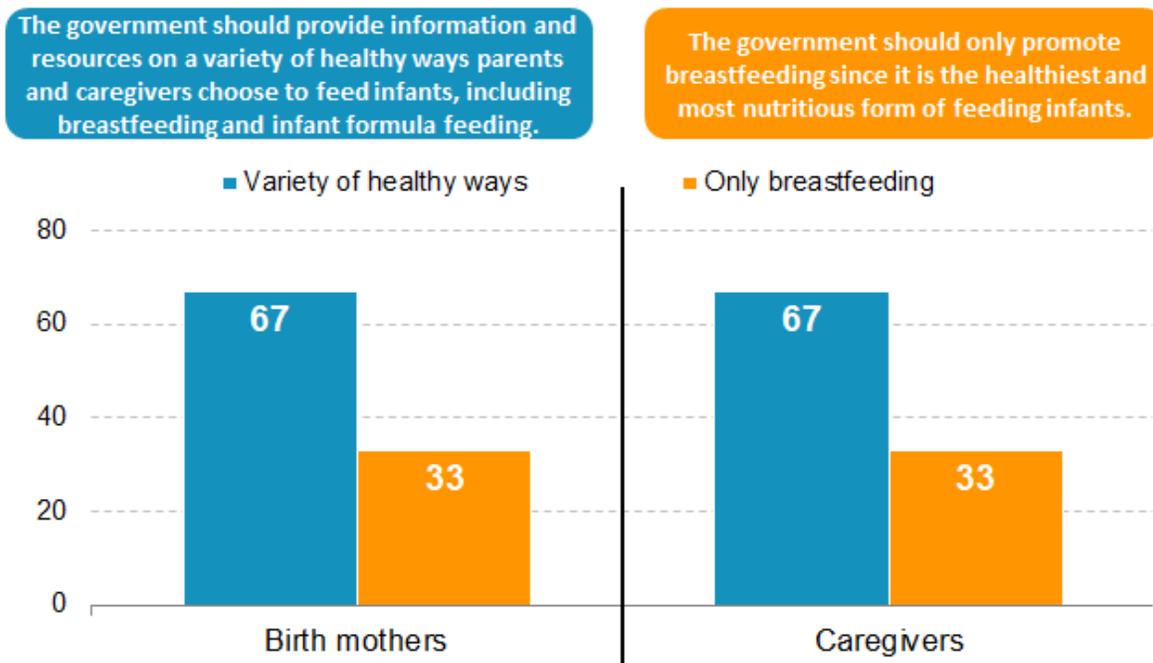
Figure 12: Caregivers, like mothers, rely on health professionals and government sources for feeding information

**How important of a source is this for you when it comes to receiving information about feeding your baby? Caregivers**

	Total important, birth moms	Total important, caregivers
Your baby's pediatrician	89	87
Your doctor or OBGYN	81	81
Lactation consultant	76	73
WIC website or clinic	66	73
Your family	69	75
Government websites like the CDC or HHS	59	56
Birth coach or doula	53	57
Your state's department of health website	54	67
Your friends	55	57
Books or DVDs on pregnancy and maternity	52	58
Infant formula company materials	48	57
The internet, YouTube videos, or podcasts	42	39
Social media	37	36
Television and radio	32	36
Magazines	32	32

Given this backdrop, caregivers largely share mothers' views that the government should provide information and resources on a variety of healthy feeding options, rather than solely promoting breastfeeding. Sixty-seven percent of caregivers, the same share as of mothers, believe the government should provide information on a variety of infant feeding options. [Figure 13]

Figure 5: Caregivers believe government should provide information beyond just breastfeeding



And caregivers feel strongly about information provided at the hospital – 78% believe that hospitals should provide information on both breastfeeding and infant formula so that mothers and caregivers have all the information to make an informed choice.

Caregivers are far from a homogenous group. Some live with the baby; some do not. Some are the sole primary caregiver; some help out. Yet a majority of caregivers, 71%, agree that breastfeeding only promotion leaves out certain kinds of families who do not have breast milk available.

### Mothers, fathers, other caregivers want to make their own decisions

Mothers are clear-eyed when it comes to making decisions on how to feed their baby: they feel educated; they rely on trusted sources. Majorities of both mothers and caregivers understand that breastfeeding is the healthiest option for their baby.

Most moms and caregivers are feeding their baby breastmilk in some form. Yet many mothers and caregivers will tell you – formula also plays an important role. It is important for the mother who is not physically able to produce enough milk to feed her baby; for the mom who needs to go back to work and doesn't have the support of her employer to pump while there; for the caregiver or adoptive parent who looks after a baby without the birth mother; and for the

caregiver who is looking after a grandbaby or niece or nephew while mom is at work or school or no longer in the picture.

Mothers and caregivers are clear about wanting to make their own decisions, but there exists a clear role for government in providing clear, science-based information and the support that parents and caregivers need to make informed choices. For many, feeding needs to be aligned with parents' and caregivers' needs, individual beliefs, circumstances and experiences: their health, their work situation, and the realities they face.