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Hannakaisa Niela-Vilén, PhD, RM, is a Postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Nursing Science, University of Turku, Finland. She has been working at the Department for five years; first as a doctoral candidate and later as a researcher. Her main research interests are breastfeeding support, breastfeeding attitudes and early physical contact between a mother and her newborn infant. Her areas of expertise as a teacher of nursing science are qualitative

research methods. Dr Niela-Vilén's four-year doctoral candidate position was funded by the Academy of Finland. Her PhD study was about breastfeeding preterm infants and early physical contact between mother and her preterm or sick infant. In addition, a social media –based intervention for breastfeeding mothers of preterm infants was developed. Before the academic career, Niela-Vilén has worked seven years as a midwife in the delivery ward.

Supporting mothers to breastfeed their preterm infant

Breastfeeding provides optimal nutrition for a preterm infant and a concrete way of being a mother to a vulnerable preterm infant. Breastfeeding even the smallest preterm infant is possible, but it demands persistence and hard work from the mother. Support and counselling from health care professionals are essential, but it seems that the quality of support and counselling is varying.

Although professional support is essential, peer support between mothers is an important source of emotional and informational support. Breastfeeding peer support has been traditionally conducted via face-to-face meetings to the mothers of full-term infants, but there is little evidence showing that peer support would be an effective method of promoting breastfeeding in preterm infants. Internet-based peer support is accessible despite geographical distance or time constraints but the evidence of its effectiveness is limited.

In the era of social media and digital technology, new and innovative methods for providing support for the breastfeeding mothers of preterm infants need to be developed and tested. A breastfeeding peer-support group utilising social media was developed for the mothers of preterm infants to support them in their challenges when breastfeeding. The mothers of preterm infants were able to discuss breastfeeding and were able to share their experiences and feelings with peer supporters and with each other. The new intervention showed no effect on the duration of breastfeeding the duration of breast milk

expression or maternal breastfeeding attitudes. However, mothers enjoyed the experience and some of them felt they received support with their breastfeeding.

In future, more research needs to be conducted on support interventions in social media. In addition, digital health games have been successfully used in health promotion. The games seem to be effective in fostering knowledge, changing behaviour and attitudes. Some elements of gamification could also be utilised in breastfeeding support.