HOW YOUR CONGREGATION CAN SUPPORT MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Twelve Simple Ways to Help Women and Infants in your Church and Community

In 2013, 23,440 babies in the United States died before their first birthday. The majority of these deaths were preventable. Despite the sad statistics, any mother will tell you that simple things can make a big difference in her family’s survival.

While the majority of infant and maternal deaths are from low-income families, it’s worth emphasizing that infant mortality knows no economic borders. Middle class babies also are born too soon and die before their first birthday. Whether it is taking time to build a relationship with a pregnant woman or encouraging breastfeeding in church, below are 12 simple steps your congregation can take to change the current statistics.

1. **Build relationships with women who are pregnant or parenting infants.**

   If you have a ministry that serves families (e.g., food pantry, meals, clothing room), take time to get to know them. Have one-on-one conversations. Invite them to coffee. Listen to their hopes and dreams, as well as their challenges. Conversation and relationships can help you discern helpful ways to support them.

2. **Become Safe Sleep Ambassadors.**

   Learn the ABCs of safe sleep, that babies are safest when they sleep alone, on their backs in a crib. Your local health departments can provide information that you can share with your members and families.

3. **Offer rides to health care appointments.**

   Access to early prenatal care for pregnant women is one important factor in having a healthy, full-term pregnancy. Likewise, well-child visits contribute to a child reaching her or his first birthday. Many families lack transportation to keep these appointments. Offering rides and encouragement to keep appointments may be helpful.

4. **Conduct diaper drives.**

   Babies use a lot of diapers! And, SNAP (food stamps) benefits cannot be used to purchase them. Many low-income families report rinsing and re-using disposable diapers—an unsanitary practice. Collecting diapers to give to families or to organizations that serve families is a very useful, valued gift.

5. **Host a baby shower.**

   Invite pregnant women you know, or plan a party where guests bring supplies families can use: diapers, onesies, toiletries, wipes. Pinterest has many fun ideas of crafts to make using disposable diapers, bibs, booties, etc., that would be delightful gifts. If you don’t know pregnant women to invite, donate the items to a local shelter or actually host the shower at the shelter.
6. **Sponsor a smoking cessation class.**

Smoking while pregnant is one of the highest contributing factors to preterm and low birth weight babies. Likewise, smoking around infants contributes to asthma and is a factor in infant mortality. Sponsor a class (tapping into local resources such as health departments, heart association, breathing associations) for families who smoke. If possible, offer incentives for those who attend.

7. **Expand a food pantry to include fruits and vegetables.**

A healthy diet supports a healthy full-term pregnancy. Consider adding fresh foods to your pantry. Many food banks offer free fresh produce to organizations that can quickly distribute to families.

8. **Teach nutrition education and cooking classes.**

In our fast food society, in many families no one knows how to cook healthy meals. Offer cooking classes where participants get to help prepare the food and then enjoy the meal as fellowship. This can be informative as well as help to build communities of support.

9. **Encourage your church to serve healthier meals, whether for congregation members or community meals.**

It has been said that the unhealthiest meals are the church potluck. The same could be said for meals we serve to the community. The foods in both cases are often highly processed, prepared with a lot of salt, sugar or fat, and laden with carbohydrates. Include healthy food options at church events to support members who have special dietary needs, are trying to reach a healthy weight, or are just trying to stick to healthy habits.

10. **Become a baby-friendly facility**

How sensitive is your church to the needs of a mother? Do you offer childcare? Do you support breastfeeding mothers? Are you kind to the mother with a fussy baby? The World Health Organization has developed guidelines for hospitals that wish to support breastfeeding. Adopt these policies for your church, workplace or public facility. Visit: [www.babyfriendlyusa.org/about-us/baby-friendly-hospital-initiative/the-ten-steps](http://www.babyfriendlyusa.org/about-us/baby-friendly-hospital-initiative/the-ten-steps)

11. **Partner with organizations serving pregnant women and children.**

If your congregation doesn’t offer any direct service ministries, partner with one that does and support it in any of the action steps above. Become aware of what the resources are in your community so that you can refer families who could use the support.

12. **Sponsor Grief Support Groups**

When a family does experience the loss of a child, provide caring support for them as they grieve. Your local hospital, hospice or other chaplains may help you to identify resources.