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Save the Children Philippines to mothers: Breastfeed infants exclusively on first 6 months

Save the Children Philippines is urging mothers to breastfeed infants exclusively during the first six months to protect them from diseases such as diarrhea and pneumonia – the world’s leading causes of child death.

The group raised concern on the steady decline of exclusive breastfeeding in the Philippines with 65 to 68.6 per cent of mothers breastfeeding exclusively for the first two months but declining to 29 percent as babies turn 5 months. The figure was reflected in the 2018 Expanded National Nutrition Survey of the Department of Science and Technology – Food and Nutrition Research Institute.

The call was made in time for the World Breastfeeding Week, celebrated from August 1 to 7 with the theme: “Empower Parents. Enable Breastfeeding” to raise awareness on the many benefits of breastfeeding.

Despite known benefits of breastmilk, 60 per cent of the world’s total infants including those in the Philippines are not getting the recommended six months of exclusive breastfeeding.

Lawyer Albert Muyot, Chief Executive Officer of Save the Children Philippines said existing laws including the Milk Code and First 1,000 Days mandate local governments and hospitals to facilitate exclusive breastfeeding for newborn babies up to six months.

He said local health and nutrition workers have a critical role to allow the infant to be breastfed in the first hour after birth and assist mothers to breastfeed exclusively in the first six months and to continue up to two years with complementary feeding.

“Local leaders should invest in health and nutrition of children by hiring adequate number of skilled health and nutrition workers to ensure mothers breastfeed immediately after birth and exclusively up to six months,” said Muyot.

In a research study of Save the Children Philippines, it cited the decline in breastfeeding practice due to the lack of skilled health workers in maternity clinics in the communities.

The study also noted rampant violations of the Philippine Milk Code or Executive Order 51, National Code of Marketing Breast Milk Supplements and Other Products that prohibits the promotion of milk products as breastmilk substitutes.

It also blamed aggressive promotions of giant manufacturers of breastmilk substitutes or milk formula targeting mothers and putting health claims in the packaging that misinform the public that the benefits of breastmilk can be gained from infant formula.

The study noted that there are still milk companies that sponsor trips and conventions of doctors and health workers to encourage them to promote milk products to mothers of infants and young children.

Save the Children Philippines implements a Maternal, Newborn and Child Health and Nutrition program in the most deprived communities in Caloocan, Navotas and Malabon in Metro Manila as well as in the provinces of Sarangani and North Cotabato conflict-affected areas in Mindanao.

Dr. Amado Parawan, Health and Nutrition Advisor of Save the Children Philippines said besides exclusive breastfeeding for six months, mothers should ensure continuous breastfeeding up to two years to guarantee optimum health of their babies.

Save the Children Philippines advocated the passage of the Republic Act No. 11148 or Kalusugan at Nutrisyon ng Mag-Nanay Act that ensures optimum care of a child from conception up to two years or the first 1,000 days of life to reduce malnutrition and child deaths due to preventable causes.

The law, now passed as ordinance in the cities of Malabon, Caloocan and Navotas, and the municipalities of Magpet and Arakan in North Cotabato and Alabel in Sarangani mandates exclusive breastfeeding for babies during the first six months.

More than 30 studies worldwide have shown that breastfeeding provides optimum benefits to both mothers and babies that include:

- Reduces the risk of dying for infants and young children. At least 840,000 neonatal deaths can be prevented annually if breastfeeding is initiated within an hour after birth.
- Boost immune system for infants and young children living in areas with poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water.
- Reduce cases of respiratory tract infections, gastrointestinal infections, urinary tract infections and otitis media among babies and children.
- Reduce rates of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome within the first year of life.
- Decrease incidence of both insulin-dependent and non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus among children
- Reduce possibility of lymphoma, leukemia, and Hodgkin's disease, obesity, and allergic conditions in children.
- Reduce risks of mothers getting breast cancer, ovarian cancer and type 2 diabetes.

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