

Learning Basic Spanish for Breastfeeding Support: ¡sí, se puede!

[Dorothy Potter Snyder](#) September 8, 2016



WIC, other government agencies, the FNS, and hospitals around the country operate on a principle that's called "fair and equal treatment". It applies to grocery stores, health clinics, employment and, of course, breastfeeding support. We take it as a basic principle that no one should get a shoddier product or service because s/he has a disability, is older, is of a certain race, or speaks a language other than English.

But can a Spanish-speaking woman and her baby really get fair and equal treatment at a clinic in which there are no Spanish-speaking lactation consultants? Where the receptionist is called in to interpret for clients, a receptionist who is not trained as an interpreter and who, as a heritage speaker, may have a slim grasp of Spanish for breastfeeding support? Where educational materials, if translated into Spanish at all, are often incorrectly translated and fail to take into account sometimes low literacy levels among Hispanic immigrant women?

You may be thinking, yes, but interpretation services exist. Why, you can even get them on the phone now! And, yes, many hospitals and clinics do that. WIC clinics do not, because they are underfunded, and that is where the majority of Hispanic mothers come for help. Furthermore, there is absolutely no substitute for the trust and confidence engendered by a care provider communicating directly with his/her client in the same language. None. Breastfeeding issues are deeply emotional and personal: going through a third party does not create the client/caregiver bond that produces best result.

So can a mother and her baby get fair and equal breastfeeding support in a place where no one understands her culture or her language? The answer is no. Fair and equal treatment is impossible under these conditions.

But resources to help caregivers learn enough Spanish to conduct an initial evaluation and offer assistance to women struggling with breastfeeding their babies are few to none. As far as I know, I am the only person in the country who has created a core curriculum for teaching basic Spanish for application to breastfeeding support. There is one excellent book I'm familiar with, but when I tried to use it in my class it proved too advanced for my beginner-level students. So I developed a curriculum for beginners, students with zero

knowledge of Spanish, to teach enough basic grammar, vocabulary and cultural sensitivity to get them started connecting with their Hispanic clients in Spanish. Teaching my little groups of 12 to 15 people, all in online synchronous classes, I've proved over and over again that nurses and IBCLCs who take my classes can connect with their Hispanic clients, and can create better health outcomes for Hispanic nursing mothers. One of my students won a national award for the performance of her WIC clinic in California: thanks to her Spanish, her clinic was among the top three in positive breastfeeding outcomes in the entire country.

Why does this matter? Because breastfed babies become healthier, more well-adjusted, smarter people.

More mothers breastfeeding for longer and healthier, happier moms and babies: that's the goal. The CDC now says that 6 months is the benchmark that mothers and their babies should shoot for. Some in the lactation community say that the longer a child is breastfed, the healthier, smarter and better emotionally adjusted s/he is. I don't doubt it because I've seen these kids: high-performers in school, emotionally well-adjusted, independent, and experiencing dramatically lower rates of obesity, asthma and diabetes. And then there's the emotional and physical benefits to the mothers themselves. Is breastmilk magic? Well, yes, it kind of is. But it's scientific magic: we know why it works.

My point: if more Hispanic women got fair and equal breastfeeding support in their first language, the nation would save millions, perhaps billions, in health care costs.

This is quite apart from the incalculable benefit of increased human happiness and well-being. So then why isn't someone besides me teaching Spanish for breastfeeding support?

My students who are nurses and LCs face terrible obstacles: long work hours, trying to learn Spanish at community colleges where classes are huge and the curriculum has nothing to do with lactation, and underfunded WIC programs are among them. There is a huge failure by funding organizations and government to understand the terrible repercussions of a lack of Spanish-speaking lactation support professionals, the potential benefits, and lack of funding for education. health care providers in general and lactation support professionals in particular. I've worked for good-hearted non-profits like USLCA who paid me to teach the programs I developed, though they could not afford (nor did I ask them) to pay me for the weeks and weeks it took me to create the curriculum. Ultimately small groups and non-profits simply do not have the staff or resources to run ongoing educational programs like this. I continue to search for a smart, social good-motivated app developer to help me create a mobile app to teach Spanish for Lactation Support: I still believe you're out there.

I keep trying. Because women's health and baby's lives are at stake.

This month, I am working in conjunction with [Cygnus Lactation Services LLC](#) in Mundelein, IL to teach another group of IBCLCs Spanish for breastfeeding support. It's a special class to me because Jeanne Cygnus, founder and president of CLS, was one of my first students at USLCA. She never gave up on the desire to learn Spanish for breastfeeding support or the mission to get more IBCLCs and nurses involved in connecting with their Hispanic clients and achieving better outcomes for mothers and children. CERPs will be awarded for completion of the course, and this kind of professional development serves lactation support providers well: many of my students have gotten better jobs because they could demonstrate Spanish language proficiency.

Registration has begun for a class beginning September 20th, and is almost

closed, but there are a few spaces left. If you are interested in attending this online, synchronous Spanish for Lactation Support class from your home anywhere in the country (or abroad), please contact Jeanne Cygnus: 847-837-4091 or Jeanne@cygnuslactation.com. And if you're an app developer with a notion to do some social good? Contact me: Dorothy Potter Snyder at www.dorothypotterspanish.com.

Sometimes the most elegant, functional solutions to social problems are the simple ones. When it comes to breastfeeding and the health of new mothers and their babies, my answer is simple: learn to talk to her.