



Knowledge Brief

Orientation to Lactation Personnel

Introduction

The need to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding has been at the forefront of maternal and child health interventions for decades. While breastfeeding may be a natural process, education, support, and clinical lactation care are needed for the successful initiation of breastfeeding and to address challenges to the breastfeeding and lactation process. The lactation field is replete with a bewildering array of personnel who fulfill these roles, but their titles can be confusing to parents, policy makers, legislators, insurers, employers, hospitals, and the healthcare system.¹ The National Lactation Consultant Alliance (NLCA) recognizes the following three categories of lactation personnel, each with specific qualifications based upon the extent of their education and training:¹

LACTATION CONSULTANT

International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC®) provides clinical lactation care, especially in high-risk or complex cases

BREASTFEEDING/LACTATION EDUCATOR OR COUNSELOR

There are approximately 20 designations in this category providing basic breastfeeding education and counseling (Table 1)

BREASTFEEDING PEER SUPPORTER

Mother-to-mother support personnel who provide basic support and encouragement

The US Women's Preventive Services Initiative (a joint program between the US Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and led by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) defines lactation personnel as follows:

"Clinical lactation professionals providing clinical care include, but are not limited to, licensed lactation consultants, the IBCLC®, certified midwives, certified nurse-midwives, certified professional midwives, nurses, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, and physicians.

Lactation personnel providing counseling, education or peer support include lactation counselors/breastfeeding educators and peer supporters."²

The Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine also provides a clear line of demarcation identifying only IBCLCs as allied healthcare lactation personnel who are able to perform clinical lactation assessment and plan of care.³

¹ Strong, G., Gober, M., & Walker, M. (2023). Speaking the same language: A call for standardized lactation terminology in the United States. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 39(1), 121-131.

² Women's Preventive Services Initiative. *Breastfeeding services and supplies*. <https://www.womenspreventivehealth.org/recommendations/breastfeeding-services-and-supplies/>

³ Rosen-Carole, C.B., Prieto, E., AlHreashy, F., et al. (2025). Current scope of practice for breastfeeding and lactation medicine physicians and providers: Description of an emerging subspecialty. https://www.bfmed.org/assets/DOCUMENTS/PositionStatements/Final_Org_ScopeofPracticePaper.pdf

Recommendations

1. NLCA recommends that legislators and policy makers exercise specificity in defining lactation personnel when writing legislative bills or policies. The three categories of personnel are not equivalent in preparation and are not interchangeable. Co-mingling lactation personnel increases the risk for harm.
2. The healthcare system including hospitals, clinics, insurers, and physician offices should be aware of the differences among lactation personnel such that risk appropriate lactation services are provided.
3. Understand the difference between education, support, and clinical care.
 - Education involves providing basic breastfeeding and lactation teaching
 - Support involves offering encouragement
 - Clinical care involves:
 - Taking an individualized maternal, child, and feeding history
 - Performing clinical assessments related to breastfeeding and human lactation through the systematic collection of subjective and objective information
 - Analyzing data using critical thinking, clinical reasoning, and clinical judgment skills acquired through precepted clinical experience
 - Developing a lactation management and child feeding plan with demonstration and instruction to parents
 - Providing lactation and feeding education
 - Recommending and training on the use of assistive devices
 - Communicating to the primary health care practitioner(s) and referring to other healthcare practitioners, as needed
 - Conducting appropriate follow-up with evaluation of outcomes
 - Documenting the encounter in a patient record

Table 1

CATEGORY		
International Board Certified Lactation Consultant®	IBCLC®	
	PREPARATION	SERVICE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 Allied healthcare core college courses, 95 hours of lactation-specific education, and 300-1000 clinical lactation care training hours with patients. • Pass an independent, psychometrically validated board certification exam. 	Evidence-based clinical lactation care, education, and support
Breastfeeding and Lactation Educator or Counselor	Advanced Lactation Consultant (ALC) Advanced Nurse Lactation Consultant (ANLC) Baby Café Breastfeeding Counselor (BCBC) Blactation Educator (BE) Breastfeeding Counselor (BC) Breastfeeding Counselor (BFC) Breastfeeding Educator Certification (BEC) Certified Breastfeeding Counselor (CBC) Certified Breastfeeding Educator (CBE) Certified Breastfeeding Specialist (CBS)	Certified Lactation Educator (CLE) Certified Lactation Educator Specialist (CLES) Certified Lactation Counselor (CLC®) Certified Lactation Specialist (CLS) Community Lactation Educator (LE(C)) Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor (IBC) Lactation Education Counselor (LEC) Lactation Educator (LE) Military Lactation Counselor (MiLC)
	PREPARATION	SERVICE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Array of lactation-specific education requirements. • May need to pass an exam given by the education entity/company to receive their credential, certification, or certificate. • Most have no requirement of high school diploma, General Education Diploma (GED), college courses, or clinical care training. • There is no universal, independent exam verifying knowledge and skill. 	Breastfeeding and lactation education and counseling
Breastfeeding Peer Supporter	Breastfeeding Counselor (BC) Breastfeeding Heritage and Pride Program (BHP Peer Counselor) Breastfeeding Peer Counselor (BPC)	La Leche League Leader (LLL) Reaching Our Sisters Everywhere, Community Transformer (ROSE CT) Women, Infants, and Children Breastfeeding Peer Counselor (WIC BFPC)
	PREPARATION	SERVICE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required to have personal breastfeeding experience and variable hours of education, some of which may be self-study. • No requirement of high school diploma, GED, college courses or clinical care training. • There is no universal, independent exam verifying knowledge and skill. 	Breastfeeding education and peer support.

Source: Footnote 1