

Mother Knows Breast

Written by Crystal Brewe -- BT Contributor
April 2013

How you feed your infant is your choice, even if you have to fight for it



Someone recently commented to me that a local university was “progressive” because it designated an official space for nursing mothers. Hmm... *Progressive*? So if a business designates a space for you to relieve your bowels or microwave your Hot Pocket, is that also “progressive”?

I breast-fed each of my children for 13 months. I won't go on and on about the virtues and health benefits, except to say breastfeeding has positive physical and psychological effects on mother and baby alike. But it isn't easy. There are milk-production issues, pain, and a multitude of other unexpected reasons why, for some moms, it is not possible.

Breastfeeding is emotional. When, with our first child, a nurse told us the baby needed formula, I felt I had failed my only-hours-old infant. Said nurse and a lactation consultant had a knock-down, drag-out fight right in the hospital room that ended with them *taping* a tube attached to a bottle of formula to my breasts. They wanted to condition both the baby and my milk-makers while still allowing me to nourish my newborn.

This stressful experience was imprinted on me in my first few hours of motherhood. Feeding my children became singularly important to me, regardless of where we were. I openly railed against anyone who gave me the stink eye when I fed my child while in public. Why would I get such a negative reaction for this?

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Is our society so puritanical that many view this as a sexual act? Is our fear linked to the sexual repression of women in the 18th Century? Facebook bans images of breastfeeding if nipples are exposed. Really, Facebook? You, too? All this fuss over a little areola?

Understanding this public stigma, I had a hooter-hider to match every outfit, so as not to offend the weirdos who considered this act "dirty." Let's get these people on the therapist's couch and dig down. Is this Oedipus Complex 2.0?

Thankfully, great organizations like the Gathering Place in Miami are helping new parents understand and navigate these challenges. Community support is imperative during the early days of parenthood (and before). The Gathering Place fosters an environment of nurturing support. From prenatal fitness to childbirth classes to "Footsteps" -- a new-moms group -- the Gathering Place unites parents and strengthens their experiences and choices.

The Gathering Place has also become one of the first places in Miami to "recycle" mothers' breast milk for needy and critically ill infants across America. Mothers who produce more than their babies can consume may donate extra breast milk that is screened and pasteurized.

This program to ensure needy babies are not deprived of mothers' milk *is* progressive -- although *sharing* the task of feeding other people's children is not.

Historically, "wet nurses" were frequently called upon when mothers were ill or unable to provide. This practice maintained the importance and credibility of breastfeeding but underwent a paradigm shift with the advent of new cultural ideals that came with industrialization in the late 19th Century. Wet-nursing quickly became an occupation for lower-class women and now is more or less nonexistent.

A co-worker of mine astutely pointed out that there were probably a lot of challenges to this. As an exhausted mom who breast-fed two babies, she just couldn't imagine that there were many superwomen out there able to feed their own kids *and* pump for others.

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Matilda, our first child, was born in Hawaii, where there exists a large New Age community, of which my husband and I considered ourselves fringe members. That is, of course, until we confronted our own limits.

When Matilda was three months old, we were invited to an “adults only” holiday party. Our close friends, who also had a three-month-old, graciously offered to baby-sit. We left them with plenty of pumped-with-love breast milk and told them to call if they needed *anything*.

Engorged from four hours away from my new baby, I returned to a happily sleeping bundle. My fellow mother and friend proudly told me she had fed Matilda, which is why she was snoozing so cozily. Wait, I thought. *You* fed her? Did she mean the breast milk I left or that *she* fed her? It was the latter.

That night I was smacked in the face with my own emotional boundary on the breast-feeding question. I felt like someone had kissed my boyfriend when I wasn't looking. Worse. I was seconds away from a violent “Oh, no, you *didn't!*” reaction. I couldn't pinpoint why the situation upset me as much as it did, but every time I relay the story, other mothers manage to find their own reasons to be upset.

We are programmed by our experiences and our reactions to society's conditioning. Breastfeeding is emotional. Do what feels right, but make sure you are clear with your babysitter about your limits.

For more information about the Gathering Place, go to www.theplacewegather.com.

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