

The Need to Feed: Breastfeeding in Public

By Angela Kokinakos

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Breastfeeding is universally understood by health professionals as the best way to provide adequate nutrition to neonates. So why does the public seem to have such an issue with it? I think to understand the current public sentiment about breastfeeding, we must examine its history. Henri Nestle (yes, the German chocolate manufacturer) developed infant formula in 1860, but it was only used out of necessity for women who were unable to breastfeed (NCTBA, 2010). However, during World War II, formula became very popular because

women who had been homemakers were called to the workforce. Once the war was over, the trend continued; women employed outside the home grew 210% between 1940 and 1985 (NCTBA, 2010). If you think breastfeeding outside the home is awkward now, imagine trying to do it in the 1950s or 60s. Formula manufacturers capitalized on this with huge advertising campaigns and free samples designed to encourage bottle feeding and, of course, profit.

Some women did not want to abandon the connection they felt in breastfeeding, and over some discussions at a church picnic in 1956, the La Leche League was born. The organization was founded to promote breastfeeding, assist women with difficulties and answer questions; the organization's name came from the fact that newspapers wouldn't even publish meeting notices that used the word "breast" because it was considered obscene. Several public figures recognized the importance of breastfeeding, including Dr. Benjamin Spock, who advocated breastfeeding in every edition of "Baby and Child Care" published since 1947 (Spock, 2004), and Princess Grace of Monaco who famously spoke about her breastfeeding experiences in a speech to 1200 women in 1971 (UPI, 1971), and the La Leche League eventually became an internationally-recognized organization.

The newborn's immune system is still developing, but the infant is protected by her mother's antibodies for the duration of nursing. Once the child is weaned, she must rely on her own defenses (Mareib, 2007). Thus the decrease in breastfeeding correlates to an increase in infant mortality, especially with regard to gastrointestinal condition; "...there was a very strong association between diarrhea mortality and lack of breast feeding (Golding, 1997)." We now know that breastfeeding is vital, not only to the bonding process, but primarily to support the growth and development of the child. Therefore, since breasts are primarily used for feeding babies, who really benefit most from having natural breast milk, it seems a travesty that the recent idea that it's somehow shameful or should be hidden has managed to persist decades after a marketing campaign, and in contrast to advice from the medical community.

Mothers seem to feel that breastfeeding is the way to go, but they have varying ideas about how to do it. One mother said, "I don't think it should be a big deal. I personally feel having a privacy blanket thrown over is appropriate because, let's face it, breasts are still a private erogenous zone and some people are pervs. This privacy can provide focus for babies who have a harder time feeding. We're not in the dark ages. It is healthier for the baby to breast feed and more convenient for everyone if the baby gets its needs

met in a timely fashion. Women will not go back to barefoot and pregnant in front of the stove, so we need to adapt.”

Another mother claimed, “I breastfeed, but still find it hard to do in public. To be honest I am still one of the weirdos who think it's a bit strange to see a woman breastfeeding in public. I don't mind it with a cover, but the honest truth is that breasts are not only for feeding but are in fact a sexual object.”

This was echoed by a male parter who chimed in, “Initially, I react with shock, surprise, and immediately look away...then spend the next 5 min trying not to stare, because who doesn't like free boobs?”

His frankness aside, the breastfeeding backlash could be a result of the hypersexualization of breasts in the media and popular culture, which did not exist 40 years ago. “No woman should feel ashamed for feeding her child,” said a new mom, “but the reality is, even if my partner has the best intentions, he is conditioned to try to sneak a peek, and it's something which with nursing moms must contend, right or wrong, until we as a society evolve.”

This evolution seems way overdue. Despite a breastfeeding-friendly corporate policy and a state law giving women the right to nurse “in any location in which the mother is authorized to be,” Michelle Hickman of Houston, TX was harassed by Target employees for publicly breastfeeding inside the store (Nicholson, 2013). Even worse, Donnica Venters, another Houstonian, claims she was “fired for asking to pump breast milk while at work”. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission supported her in a lawsuit, and shockingly, lost.

“Lactation is not pregnancy, childbirth, or a related medical condition,” Judge Lynn Hughes wrote in her decision (Nicholson, 2013), meaning it's totally legal in Texas to discriminate *against* nursing mothers. Advocates are filing a bill to remedy the situation.

It makes me even more grateful to have relocated to Seattle, where nursing mothers are protected by WA state law and a Seattle city ordinance. Our city council unanimously made public breastfeeding a protected civil right last year; public businesses cannot “ask a nursing mother to stop, leave, go to a private area, or cover up (Ho, 2012).”

Women in Seattle were being treated like Michelle Hickman and being told to “cover up or leave,” but, “Babies don't have a lot of control over when they're hungry. We need to feed them when they're hungry. Sometimes that means you're out in a public place; get out of my business. I'm going to feed my baby. (Le, 2012)”

“For those who have been discriminated against, it's embarrassing,” said Abigail Echo-Hawk with the Seattle Women's Commission. “It can embarrass a woman so much that she may choose to stop breastfeeding (Le, 2012)”

Most women start out breastfeeding, but only 13% of US babies make it to 6 months (Li, 2004). If women want to breastfeed, and doctors encourage it because it's good for babies, it must be discrimination and discomfort that's largely to blame for the decrease. I can imagine it isn't fun to get leered at and asked to leave while you're just trying to take care of your baby.

The best way to reclaim breastfeeding is to stop responding as if breastfeeding is something of which a woman should be ashamed. Women might consider in advance ways to politely confront people who stare. For example, making eye contact, say hello, and introduce the baby. If the public was made to feel

more comfortable with the situation, then we as a society might start to lose some of the sexual stigma. If a woman was asked to cover up *or leave*, hopefully she will feel confident to assert her rights and needs to defend her child, calmly. Breastfeeding is a protected right in all 50 states; the shamers are the ones who need to be educated. However, not everyone is comfortable with watching something so intimate, or being the object of public attention. Breastfeeding should be at mother's comfort level to do, and as with all things, appropriate to the situation. Eating in public for anyone shouldn't necessarily be a big deal, but eating in the middle of a concert hall during a recital, probably not appropriate. You can do things and still be respectful. Meaning, both breastfeeding mothers and the general public may need to be more respectful and tolerant of each other's needs.

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