

But I Don't Have The Equipment! Dad's role in breastfeeding.

By John Hoffman

Originally published in Great Expectations, August 1994

I really like to watch babies breastfeed. To my eyes, it's one of the most appealing human behaviours. But I didn't always feel that way. I recall, as an adolescent, my first surreptitious glimpse of a nursing woman's breast. Rather than being erotic, as one might have expected, I found it strangely intimidating. Now, 25-odd years and three breastfed children of my own later, that seems juvenile. And it was, but it was also to be expected. When I was a kid few women breastfed, and those who did generally nursed out of sight. As adults, today's fathers have no history to draw from. Until he gets used to the idea, a new father may feel awkward, confused or embarrassed about breastfeeding.

Let's think for a moment about the kinds of discomfort that uninitiated men may feel around breastfeeding – like sexual discomfort. A new father may find a number of unsettling thoughts passing through his mind as mother and baby nurse: "I guess I'm out of luck for a while," or "Her breasts look so different," or "What if someone sees them?" The unease stems from a difficulty (which women may have as well) in reconciling the biological purpose of breasts with the role they play in our sexual relationships.

Then there's feeling 'left out'. We've heard of penis envy. What about breast envy? The ability to breastfeed gives a woman a way to meet her baby's primal need. It's immediate and intimate. How many fathers have manfully struggles to soothe a squalling infant only to see her whisked away, 'plugged in' and almost instantly comforted? It's a compelling invitation to feel frustrated, jealous, or inadequate. At worst, it's an excuse to stay away.

So yes, there are breastfeeding issues for men, but here's the bottom line. They are side issues. The decision to breastfeed belongs to a woman, and her partner's role is to support that decision, whatever it is. That doesn't mean that your input doesn't count. If your wife wants to bottle-feed and you're convinced that breast is best, it's fair to try to persuade her – but it is, after all, her body. If she's gung-ho about breastfeeding and you're not so sure, it's best to let her know. (Hopefully, most couples discuss such issues during pregnancy, or even before.) But we have to acknowledge that the father is the supporting actor, not the lead, in this particular life drama.

There's another bottom line – the baby. It seems absurd that we ever needed anything more than nature to prove to us that breastmilk is the best food for babies, but science (which, ironically, also brought us infant formula) has done so. The evidence is overwhelming and continues to mount: breastfed babies are healthier babies.

And fathers can't breastfeed. But that doesn't put us out of the picture. In fact, fathers may have a critical influence on successful breastfeeding outcomes. A supportive man helps the mother feel good about what she is doing. And he can 'mother the mother,'

helping her to be nourished and rested. (By the way, a non-breastfeeding mother needs all of this too, in addition to help with the extra work that goes with formula-feeding.)

“In the early days when she was nursing (it seemed like) all the time, the caretaking thing was really important. I had to make sure she ate. If I went out I left food for her...to some extent you’re a butler. You know, if she says, ‘Would you get me a cup of tea?’ you don’t question – you just shut up and do it.”

- Stephen Elliott, father of seven month-old Chloe. His thoughts and observations punctuate this article.

Many fathers are surprised at the amount of time and emotional energy breastfeeding (and baby care in general) seems to take in the first few months. A common cartoon scenario begins with the father leaving for work, kissing his wife goodbye as she lies on the couch nursing the baby. When he gets home nine hours later, she doesn’t seem to have moved: the breakfast dishes aren’t done, there’s no supper on the table, and she’s on the couch nursing the baby.

Such a mother needs to know that her partner believes she has her priorities straight. One way you can do this is by freeing her from household tasks like food preparation, laundry and tidying. You don’t necessarily have to do everything yourself. If, for example, your work schedule limits your time at home, you can still take charge by arranging for help from friends and relatives. Again, bottle-feeding new moms need this support too – but when a nursing mother is overloaded in those intense first weeks, she may feel pressured to give up breastfeeding.

“To me, it’s not all that different from what your role is in pregnancy and labour. The father is the one who has to keep a cool head sometimes. It’s tempting to get caught up in it, but when your wife is exhausted and at her wit’s end, that’s when you have to be sensible and say “Well, maybe we could try this.”

Along with practical help, a nursing mother needs emotional support. It can be demonstrated verbally – “I’m really glad you’re doing this” – or non-verbally, by simply sitting and keeping her company while she nurses. You may have to deflect comments, such as, “Is she nursing that kid again? Maybe she doesn’t have enough milk,” which can seriously undermine a woman’s confidence. If difficulties do arise, your encouragement will help her to hang in there. Some fathers have contributed by contacting a lactation consultant or breastfeeding clinic for help with a problem.

“This is touchy, but there does seem to be this mother martyrdom: ‘I don’t need a beer, I don’t need to go out, I’ll just stay home and do another load of laundry.’ Sometimes she has come home from visiting a friend or a movie and said ‘Wow, that was great,’ and I’m thinking, ‘Yes!!! Why don’t you do it more often!?’”

A breastfeeding father sometimes walks a fine line between protecting his wife's bond with the baby, and encouraging her to take time for herself. Friends and relatives who don't understand how often a young baby nurses may pressure new parents to leave the baby with a sitter. If your partner's feeling a bit vulnerable, maybe *you* should be the one to explain that she can only attend cousin Dean's wedding if baby is welcome too. On the other hand, mothers need breaks like everyone else (even if they don't always realize it at the time). Take over with the baby now and then so she can recharge her emotional battery. It doesn't have to be a weekend in Vegas either. Sometimes a 20-minute walk or a one-hour lunch with a friend will do it.

"There is some angst about it. Breastfeeding really does bring out the disparity between the sexes. You're not the last resort. You're the second-best person for the job"

Fathers react in different ways to the notion of being 'second-best.' Some are relieved. They happily enlist their mother-in-law and head for the golf course. But for a dad like Elliott, who wants to be involved, it's more complicated. He does the background work, he cooks, he cleans, he changes diapers, but, much of the time, it seems that his nursing partner gets the payoff. Yes, she's tired, yes, she's tied down (temporarily), but he watches her experience a kind of physical and emotional fulfillment, knowing that she's doing something good.

Hopefully, you will find satisfaction in that goodness, too. It's a bit like being thrilled if your spouse won an award or got a promotion. And as your baby grows, you can take pleasure in *his* well-being, as well.

"You know that little blissed out smile that babies get when they're falling asleep at the breast? That's all I really need to see. I figure if I can't do that for her, I'm glad she's got someone who can."

At the same time, a committed and persistent father who carves out a niche in the baby's world will get some direct payoffs of his own. There are many rewarding ways of being with a baby that don't involve feeding: diapering, bathing, going for a walk, relaxing with a sleeping baby on your chest.

Oh yes, you may also give an occasional bottle of expressed milk or formula – preferably after the baby is six weeks old and breastfeeding is well established. But you will discover that not every cry means hunger. A father has a unique opportunity to be the first one to teach the baby that there are other ways to be comforted besides suckling at a breast. You don't have one to offer, so you're more likely to try – and eventually perfect – other tricks. Come to think of it, maybe dad does have 'the right equipment.' It's just different.