

Breast is Best...for Dads too!

Throughout our history mothers breastfeeding their babies has run the spectrum from feast to famine. Very long ago nearly every mother breastfed; nature obviously had a good plan. During less distant times mothers breastfeeding became unfashionable and 'proper society' did not even consider it. Many only breastfed if they could not afford a wet nurse. Mothers today often approach breastfeeding with ambiguity and fathers are having an influence on the process.

Research has shown that 98.1 percent of mothers working outside the home breastfed when fathers were completely supportive. However, when fathers were indifferent or unsupportive, mothers only breastfed 26.9 percent of the time. Who are these fathers and what is the best way forward for mothers, fathers and babies?

I have gotten into trouble with generalisations in the past. In the interest of discovering what the archetypal picture is I will risk a few. Some fathers think less is best and the sooner I get *my breasts*, and my wife, back the better. The father in this position may make his opinion known and thereby create influence over the crucial mother/child breastfeeding and bonding relationship. There is also a 'shadow' inherent here of where is bonding with dad going to come from. Other fathers stand back and defer to the mother and let her make her own choice. Whilst seemingly admirable, this may have the effect of dad feeling excluded, or excluding himself, and therefore missing out on potential benefits of his own. This approach could also lead to the mother and child not being as well provided for as they could be. Lastly, there are fathers and mothers who make joint decisions regarding breastfeeding and both 'participate' fully.

Studies reveal that hormonal activity in a father increases during his partner's pregnancy, and more so if he is present at the birth and closely involved after. When a father is intimate with his child, especially through skin to skin contact, his oxytocin production increases. Elevated oxytocin in a father is recognized as a key component in jump-starting and maintaining his nurturing instincts and bonding with his baby. Hormones are chemicals secreted by an endocrine gland or some nerve cells that regulate the function of a specific tissue or organ. It is essentially a chemical messenger that transports a signal from one cell to another. In a way, they tell us what to do; how to 'act'. Prolactin, vasopressin and oxytocin are among the hormones that are found at higher levels in men around the time of birth. Increased production of prolactin is known to promote bonding/attachment and caring. Raised vasopressin levels cause a man to want to protect his family and be at home rather than 'on the prowl in search of a mate'. Vasopressin is also known as the monogamy hormone; commitment.

Oxytocin is also produced in men and women during loving contact. Because of this it has been named 'the hormone of love' by experts in the field including Dr. Michel Odent, Sheila Kitzinger and Dr. Sarah Buckley. It is also a necessary hormone for a mother's body to produce in order to ensure a successful pregnancy and labour and also plays a role in breastfeeding. Since couples are already 'in the habit' of producing oxytocin during intimacy fathers can contribute this dimension of their relationship to the mother's labour and breastfeeding time. Consequently, *father love*, added as an ingredient to the scientific recipe of mother's labour and breastfeeding can be a useful enhancement.

The result of this increased hormonal activity is that bonding, attachment, protection, love, loyalty, commitment and caring are all enhanced in a new father. Thus science is showing us that a father with close, strong, intimate contact during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding will be supported by Mother Nature during his early engagement in the family. This then establishes a more durable foundation for a life-long loving relationship between father and child and indeed for the family itself.

While nutrition is an important part of the breastfeeding equation it is hardly the only component. Perhaps the biggest misconception is that some form of artificial milk or even bottle feeding breast milk can actually replicate breastfeeding.

A mother's breast milk is specific to her baby and changes/adapts hourly, daily and cyclically based on that baby's needs. These needs are physical, mental, emotional, and social as well as brain developmental. If food comes from a bottle instead of a breast many of these crucial components are lost.

For the majority of mothers a significant key to her successful pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding is the quality of care she receives from the father. By the father caring for the mother he is most certainly caring for his child as well. So what is the potential for a father's contribution to his family, and what benefits might he derive, during this intimate time between a mother and child?

A father can carry out virtually any and all *other* forms of caretaking for a new baby. Plus if a dad is regularly skin to skin with his baby they both benefit. Jamie, father of 13 month old Zephyr, reports, "*The breastfeeding connection is beautiful, I love watching the joy on Zephyr's face as he sucks away into bliss. I have bonded with Zephyr very well. I have always spent a lot of time with him and we are regularly skin to skin. Now, I am running around the woods, playing, cuddling, and supporting him to be free spirited. I don't feel "on the side" at all. We both have different connections with him and they are equally strong.*"

Mothers and babies need to continue their close, intimate relationship that began in the womb, a child's security depends on it and breastfeeding is a big part of this need for a baby. It is important dads understand this and differentiate their role in early parenting. Remember, dads are dissimilar to mothers and approach life, and especially parenting, differently. Mothers also need to remember that they are the gatekeepers to the baby and it is important they support 'dad's way' of being with his new baby.

Elmer is the father of 4 year old Lucien who still breastfeeds a couple of times a day. "*What a gift for me as an adult male to be around my son as a living example of abundant security. Lucien having extensive breastfeeding seems only to have supported his intelligence. Our sense is that his knowing he can connect with his mother has helped him feel securely attached and it will also simply come to an end when it does. His other life transitions have taken place in their own time, as this one likely will also.*"

An added bonus of a bonded father/child relationship is that the 'life expectance' of the family is enhanced. Fathers who do not feel included and part of a family will tend to leave, one way or another. This is reflected in our current culture for divorce and separation. A father who is attached and committed to his children is more likely to stay with his family. Science is on his side and Nature and Nurture are working in harmony. When a man's nurturing instincts and hormones are awakened everyone wins. As a culture we have the responsibility to see to it that our fathers and children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Mothers and fathers can embrace breastfeeding together and each have a higher level of satisfaction during the time of early infancy and family bonding.

The transition to fatherhood is one of the most significant and challenging experiences a man will ever face. In order to have a satisfying and successful experience fathers must feel safe, supported and confident. To optimize the possibilities for our families, we need to provide appropriate and gender specific educational, physical and emotional support for fathers.

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