

Reclaiming the Art of Breastfeeding

by Indira Lopez Bassols

This article is dedicated to Michel Odent and Liliana Lammers, doula father and doula mother to many of us. Their teachings, ideas and anecdotes have greatly inspired my amazing journey as a doula. They both planted the inspiration seed of this article.

My breastfeeding journey started almost 12 years ago in Mexico, my home country. Over the years with my three children, this journey has become an essential ingredient in my mothering. Sadly, following the developed world's bottle-feeding infatuation, breastfeeding rates seemed to have declined in some parts of Mexico. Nevertheless, breastfeeding has always been a big part of our culture and tradition.

My daughter's arrival into the world was a beautiful, powerful, physiological (non-medicated) birth. Like many "drug-free" newborns, in the first hour or so after birth she was highly alert, participative in her own way and making eye contact with me and my husband. With a bit of encouragement from my doula, my baby found the breast and fed happily for several uninterrupted minutes that felt like a blissful eternity. Over the next few days, even though I experienced slight soreness in my nipples, there were no words to express the pleasure and joy of holding this little creature into my breast.

On my mother's side, my Mexican grandmother had breastfed her eight children; on my father's side my grandmother had breastfed her three children; and my own mother breastfed her five children. In fact, every woman in my family I could recall had done so. Thus, breastfeeding was honoured in my family, and I had always felt it was natural to carry on with this powerful feminine family legacy.

I never wondered whether I would be able to breastfeed, nor did I read any books on the topic or attend a session in preparation. So, when I was pregnant the first time, I did not *think* about breastfeeding much; rather, I just *felt* that it would be fine. I

sensed a continuum between natural pregnancy, natural labour and straightforward easy breastfeeding. Time, experience and reality have shown me that, all too often, this progression does not always happen.

As a doula and a La Leche League (LLL) leader, I have witnessed too often the strong evidence on how the indiscriminate use in labour of drugs, painkillers and anaesthesia tends to negatively affect breastfeeding.(1)

Michel Odent thinks that women can not "prepare" for natural childbirth. He believes that we carry ancestral inner wisdom inside us and, *given the right conditions*, our bodies know how to birth on their own. In other words, as women we are perfectly *designed* to give natural birth. Thus, he stresses the importance during pregnancy of increasing women's confidence in their ability to give natural birth, by knowing the basics of the physiology of birth and the importance of having the presence of an unobtrusive, low profile motherly figure such as a midwife or a doula to safeguard these optimal conditions in labour.

Replacing worry, fear and doubt with trust, confidence and belief is also the best starting point for "optimal" breastfeeding. Grantly Dick-Read coined the term "childbirth without fear" several decades ago; I believe we should be spreading the message of "breastfeeding with confidence" along the same lines.

If "drug-free" born babies have been so beautifully self-attaching in the two hours following birth for centuries (2), how can it be that mothers don't have an innate built-in know-how to respond? It takes two to tango, so the answer is obvious: As women, we *do* have that response inside us. In other words, as women, we are also perfectly *designed* to breastfeed our babies.

Gabriella Palmer was already pondering the subject more than two decades ago: "How is it that in some societies, 100 percent of poor, marginally nourished women can all breastfeed successfully, while in others, groups of privileged, well-nourished women cannot?"(3)

Over the years, as a doula and a LLL leader, I have heard so many pregnant mothers say: "I will give it a go, but lots of my girlfriends were not able to breastfeed." As if breastfeeding were the same as flipping a coin and seeing on which side it lands. The number of mothers who truly cannot breastfeed should be a tiny percentage in comparison to the number who can. The same train of thought applies to c-sections, which surely can be life-saving yet have become epidemic and are questioned as being unnecessary in so many parts of the globe.

An essential component for successful breastfeeding seems to be awareness of the many successful, happy breastfeeding stories. When women hear mostly negative stories, doubt can creep in like a dormant serpent. The same has been said of natural birth. We tend to hear the unfortunate highly medicalized birth experiences and rarely do we get to hear the physiological, or as Sarah Buckley so beautifully described them, the "undisturbed" ones.(4)

Ina May Gaskin said during the first Biological Nurturing and Instinctual Behaviours Womb to World Conference (London, October 2008): "The best preparation in the Farm for new parents is to have contact with breastfeeding mothers, make nursing babies visible and exchange positive stories and experiences."

Yet today, perhaps the vast majority of women haven't seen many happily breastfeeding mothers. If they don't have positive family or friend models to aspire to and any minor problem arises in the first few days, bottle and formula are often ready "just in case." Supporting pregnant women's confidence in their future ability to breastfeed is one of the most important things midwives and doulas must do.

How can we effectively support women's confidence? A lot of midwives and doulas—like me—can draw on their own personal breastfeeding experiences to boost the confidence of new mums.

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