

Reclaiming the art of breastfeeding

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My breastfeeding journey started almost 12 years ago in Mexico, my home country. A decade ago breastfeeding was very much a part of my culture and its traditions. Nowadays, sadly, things seem to be changing in parts of Mexico and there is a decline in the breastfeeding rate. Over the years, breastfeeding has become an essential ingredient in mothering my three children.

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

While pregnant for the first time, I must confess, I did not think about breastfeeding much; I rather just felt it would be fine. I never wondered rationally if I would be able to breastfeed, nor did I read any books on the topic or attend any sessions in preparation. I had not even heard of La Leche League.

On my mother's side, my Mexican grandmother breastfed her eight children, my mother breastfed her five, and every other woman in my family tree I could recall had done so too. Indeed, breastfeeding was honoured in my family and I felt it was natural to continue this powerful feminine family legacy.

*“ Believe in yourself
that indeed you can
breastfeed your baby.
Trust your own body with
all its inner wisdom. ”*

Looking back, I sensed intuitively, perhaps naively—in my defence I was only 25 years old—that there was a continuum from natural pregnancy, natural labour to straightforward easy breastfeeding. Time, experience and reality have shown me that, all too often, this progression does not happen.

However, as a La Leche League Leader and a doula, I have witnessed too frequently the indiscriminate cocktail of drugs, painkillers and anaesthesia used in labour and how they tend to impact negatively on breastfeeding. In my role as a birth doula, I have been privileged to study directly with Dr Michel Odent, the renowned French obstetrician and perhaps one of natural birth's greatest champions. He advocates that women cannot "prepare" for natural childbirth. How can they? We carry ancestral inner wisdom and, given the right conditions, our bodies know how to birth a baby. In other words, as women we are perfectly designed to give birth naturally. Odent stresses the importance of increasing women's confidence, while they are pregnant, in their natural ability to give birth and in setting appropriate conditions for labour.

The same elements are crucial for "optimal" breastfeeding. Replacing worry, fear, and



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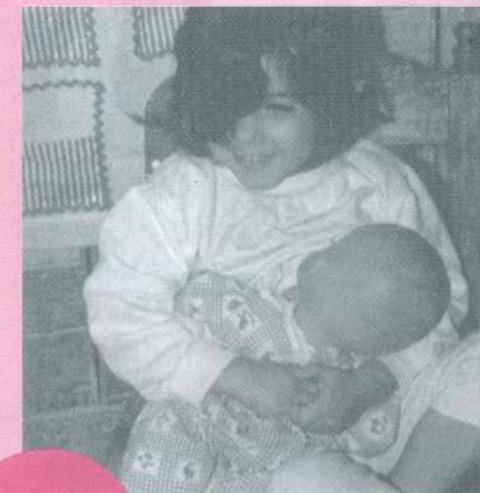
The same applies to the necessity for caesarean sections (which indeed can be life saving) yet happen with alarming frequency. An essential component for successful breastfeeding seems to require an awareness of the successful, happy breastfeeding experiences of others. If we listen to all the bad stories doubt can creep in like a dormant serpent. Similarly, we tend to hear the unfortunate highly medicalised birth experiences and rarely do we get to hear the natural, positive or "undisturbed" ones, as Sarah Buckley so beautifully described them.*

doubt with trust, confidence, and belief is the best starting point. Grantley Dick-Read, an obstetrician who practised in the 1920s and promoted natural drug-free childbirth, coined the term "childbirth without fear"; I believe we should talk of "breastfeeding with confidence" along the same lines.

If "drug-free" born babies have been so beautifully self-attaching in the following hours right after birth for centuries, 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 within us. In other words, for the vast majority of women we are also perfectly designed to breastfeed our babies.

Over the years as a La Leche League Leader and a birth doula, I have heard many pregnant mums say: "I will give it a go but lots of my girlfriends were not able to breastfeed." As if they were going to flip a coin and see on which side it would land. The number of mothers who truly cannot breastfeed should be a tiny percentage in comparison to the number that can.

Today, perhaps the vast majority of women haven't seen any happily breastfeeding mothers. If they don't have positive models of family or friends to aspire to and any minor problem arises, bottles and formula are often ready "just in case". Supporting pregnant women to give them confidence in their future ability to breastfeed is one of the most important things LLL Leaders do.



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Breastfeeding Matters July/August 2009 37

