

The Art of Breastfeeding
by April
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Before the birth of our first child, I honestly never considered that breastfeeding was anything but that: A way to feed a baby from the breast. I had no idea that it is actually in many ways an art form. A stunning stained-glass portrait carefully etched in rosy hues depicting the glow of motherhood. And beyond that, to learn that it creates an extraordinary secure bonding between a mother and child, and father too. I assumed the act itself was not at all unique, but also figured somehow amongst women it was a well-kept secret, done at home behind drawn shades, effortless in its practice. You give birth to a baby, and simply feed this child from your breast, which is filled with endless amounts of milk. No thought to it. Nothing exceptional about it. It is just a way to feed a baby. Or so I believed.

While I was happily exuding the beauty of pregnancy, I naively assumed that I knew enough about breastfeeding to know, quite simply, that I would do it and do it with some sort of mother-ease. Most in my family did, maybe not for long or not very successfully, but they did it. Most of the children on our family were nursing babies at some point in their newborn days. In my grandmother's day however, breastfeeding was not distinctive, it was the only way to nourish your children. Not to mention that it was done throughout the first 2-4 years of a child's life. Now, although accepted rather hesitantly by doctors and society, nursing for that long, or anything beyond 6 months, now has somewhat of an imposing name attached to it. Extended Breastfeeding. There wasn't such a phrase for long-term breastfeeding in the old days. But for some reason in today's society we need to give new names to old practices so that we somehow don't get ostracized for doing them. And this is just about nursing past what society has labeled the norm, 6 months or more. This is simply the actual span of how long a mother chooses to nurse. There are other factors that mothers have to deal with in breastfeeding that make it difficult to even try.

Today's fast paced planet has mothers all over the world plagued with the worries of returning to work after the birth of a child. They have to deal with the separation from that child, as well as (if breastfeeding) dreading the act of pumping swelled breasts in between bathroom breaks and losing their jobs over it. In many parts of the world they are trying to impose legislation that would allow paid time for mothers to leave to nurse their children (while at work), or go and pump their milk in peace and quiet, without being hassled for doing so. In some places this is already in effect. A long shot at best in actually happening in North America sadly. Formula companies, against World Health Code stipulations, try to force-feed new mothers negative ideals by sending out free samples of formula to plant seeds of doubt in their heads that they can

indeed continue to breastfeed for as long as they wish. As daunting as it seems to some inexperienced mothers, you can indeed continue to breastfeed through anything; working, vacations, travel, illness and prescribed medications, in public and even through a new pregnancy. When all is said and done, all it takes is some creativity to perfect this art adventure. Of course, when problems arise, this is easier said than done.

Unlike now, when there were problems with nursing back when my grandmother was a new mom, they simply struggled through it and figured out on their own how to overcome them. They didn't have La Leche League leaders and meetings or Lactation Consultants to turn to. There was no Internet invented yet, so no maze of flashy web sites to research. Not even a how-to book to browse through. They just kept nursing. They dealt with the pains of swollen engorged breasts, low milk supply, thrush (Yeast infection of the mouth transmitted from mother to baby), cracked and bleeding nipples, plugged ducts and cysts, sleepy babies who refuse to drink, nursing more than one at a time (tandem nursing), and much more. We now have a plethora of options to choose from when such problems arise. But still many give up breastfeeding too soon. Many more don't even try. I admit to never giving any of this much thought. I just knew I would do it, and naively believed I could do it. I mean, we have breasts, and breasts-all sexual ideals aside-are for feeding babies. Right? Little did I know that my dose of mothering-reality was just waiting to greet me.

I quickly learned that breastfeeding is indeed a form of art. It is something to be nurtured and it takes time to learn. It usually does not come easily either. Nor does it come natural. Many confuse breastfeeding, (the act) being the natural way to feed a child, with it coming naturally to a mother. There is an enormous difference. I firmly believe there should be more information spread throughout the world about breastfeeding so that mothers are not so stunned when they find themselves not able to succeed at nursing right away. There is no worse feeling than returning home from the hospital with your new beautiful baby in your arms, only to realize you cannot feed your child because you have no idea what you are doing. Many women, already compounded with post partum blues soon dive head first into depression because of such stress. Many books will tell you simply expose a breast swelled with milk, put the baby's mouth to the nipple, and let him/her have at it. Those of us experienced in nursing know darn well there is a heck of a lot more to it than that. Hence my comparison to art. It is bad enough knowing that there isn't the much needed support and regard for breastfeeding out there that there should be, but to have the information that exists downplay the seriousness of it all makes many women quickly give up or feel like failures because of the surprises they face when starting out.

I was one such mom. The reality of breastfeeding soon turned what was supposed to be the happiest time in my life into the most difficult and

disheartening one. Thanks to a tedious labour, traumatic birth and a baby suffering severe jaundice (yellowing of the skin caused blood cells and liver not fully matured), we soon encountered real problems. This was topped with a horrible army drill instructor-type Lactation Consultant at the hospital who questioned my mothering skills and nurses who showered me with formula samples rather than help me. After ten weeks of depression and struggles with trying to feed my daughter solely on my breastmilk, I finally cut out all formula supplementation in a fit of anger and allowed her to nurse constantly. Suddenly we were a nursing couple. We were at ease with one another. She ate and ate, and I smiled and smiled. No more fuss, no more crying (from either one of us!) and I finally understood the beauty of breastfeeding. It is not achieved easily. It takes hard work. It doesn't always happen right away; in fact it usually takes on average up to 3 months to get a milk supply established. It takes patience. It is not the glorious heavenly portrait of mother and child shining through rosy hues of etched glass; it can be awkward, sometimes grueling and many times frustrating. But the miracle of breastfeeding is the bond you share with your child. This is the art form that takes on a life of its own. This is what my grandmother means when she sternly asks if I am still nursing my now-toddler. I happily report to her that yes, in fact, we are still a nursing couple. Society's views are something I take pride in trying to change in my personal quest to give my child the best. Maybe if more mothers looked upon themselves as artists creating the most beautiful and stunning portrait every time they nurse their precious child, just maybe they would reconsider any negative connotations about breastfeeding. That is my hope. I am living proof it can be done. Joyfully, wherever I wish, for however I choose, through anything I face. I have always been creative in my endeavors, but breastfeeding, by far, is my best work yet.