

It's Not Really About the Milk

You won't "get it" at first. At first it's all about technique, and position, and time, and swallowing, and soreness, and feeling as if your whole world has narrowed to Feeding The Baby. Those of us who have enjoyed nursing our children are on the other side of a great emotional gulf from you. We can't explain it, we can only try to help you across the bridge, to where you can see for yourself. If you stay caught up in this as a feeding method, you may never get all the way across the bridge. But oh, the view from the other side! At the least, you need to know it's there.

Those of us who "got it" wouldn't feel guilty if we were prevented from nursing our next child. We'd feel anguished. "Guilt" means you didn't do something for someone else that you "should" have done whether or not you enjoyed it yourself. "Anguish" means great pain and grief, as if you've had a piece of yourself torn away.

Imagine having to move by shifting your weight left, then moving your right leg forward, knee slightly bent at first but gradually straightening, right heel landing as you rise on the ball of your left foot, swinging your left arm forward in reverse synchrony with your right as it moves back, then performing a mirror image of the whole process for the next step. Not fun, not easy, not graceful, not something you want to keep working at. But imagine the ease and pleasure of simply... walking. Now imagine someone telling you that you have to give it up. Guilt? Or anguish?

I wish I could convey to you the simple, thought-less, vast, delicious pleasure of nursing my children. Once I "got it," I didn't "feed" them, didn't worry about intervals, didn't hold back. We nursed when they wanted and when I wanted - even just to keep them quiet while I was on the phone. At night, nursing was a quiet mending of the day's disorders. Oh, not always, but as someone said, "Of course there's an inconvenience to nursing. But there's an inconvenience to being a mother." Breastfeeding was a fundamental, essential connection for us, and made everything else - from newborn diapers to two-year-old tantrums - far, far simpler. Then there's the ego-building experience of being the perfect center of another person's universe.

Can you achieve the same bond through bottle-feeding? No. Remember that a breastfeeding mother is in a specific hormonal state. Her whole body responds to her baby in a way that a bottle-feeding mother's or a baby-sitter's or a father's cannot. Her infant receives all his calories in a full-bodied, full-mouthed, skin-on-skin embrace, always from his beloved mother. Her older child comes to her to have growing pains of all kinds soothed simply in a way unique to breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding is a newborn's first relationship, designed to continue throughout a child's early years. As a culture, we tell ourselves - without evidence - that the absence of this fundamental human relationship has no longterm implications for mother or child or family or society.

I have enjoyed our children at every stage so far - and they are now young adults. Their father and I felt as if we did no real parenting after the first ten years or so; we sat back and enjoyed them. This is unusual in America today. Is it partly related to our start in a long, luxurious breastfeeding relationship? I think so. And like every woman who has reached the other side of the bridge, I hope I can extend a hand back to help you across. The view is irreplaceable!