Some Lactation Activists are Real Drips

By Ruth Kava — January 14, 2016

Breast or bottle? That choice should be freely available to a new mother with no coercion or misinformation to push her decision one way or another. She should be able to pick whichever method, or combination of methods, best suits her, her baby and family.

But according to a new book, Lactivism by Courtney Jung (recently reviewed here [3]), that's often not the case.

Lactivism points out, sadly, that many forces have converged to turn the choice of how to feed one's baby into "a veritable minefield." Some zealots have attributed such a wide swath of benefits to breastfeeding from higher IQs to less frequent SIDS that one wonders how anyone whose infancy included sipping formula from a bottle has been able to learn to read, let alone survive to adulthood.

Some of the myths surrounding breastfeeding include items such as "women have always breastfed, and it's the normal, natural way to feed a baby." Yet we know that throughout history, upper-class women typically employed the services of so-called wet nurses one wonders if, had safe formula been available, such women might have chosen to formula feed instead.

Why the push? Well, one aspect may well be the industry that has sprung up around breastfeeding. We have lactation consultants, doulas, breast pumps (and the companies that produce them), breastfeeding pillows, lactation bras all have benefited from the recent emphasis on the importance of breastfeeding. As have private breast milk banks some of which provide possibly contaminated supplies. [4] But these are not concerns that lactation activists consider instead they inveigh against "Big Formula" as though any profits they make are somehow nefarious. And some officials have unfortunately added their weight to the imperative to breastfeed as we have discussed here [5].

However, while there are real benefits to both mother and baby from breastfeeding, not every new
mother can, or wants to, breastfeed her baby. Even groups that are wholeheartedly pro-breastfeeding have noted the pressures that are often levied against new mothers. On the website, The Leaky B@@B [6], Jessica Martin-Weber notes, "It can be downright dangerous to suggest that you are considering or *gasp* even have actually supplemented with formula. If you do, your very mothering ability could be called into question with accusations of feeding your child poison and comparisons of formula to human waste."

Perhaps the most important point she makes is this:

"Instead of telling women what they should do and are doing wrong without really listening to them, what would happen if we provided a safe space to just be offering support without arrogantly assuming we know exactly what choices each woman should make in her individual circumstances with her available financial, emotional, and relational resources?"

And any advice should include the honest information that current infant formulas strive to replicate as closely as possible the constitution of human milk, and that babies fed these formulas can thrive and be as healthy as any fed breast milk.

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