

The Dance of Nurture: Eliminating barriers to breastfeeding

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We have spent the last two decades telling women how to overcome the barriers to breastfeeding. Many have succeeded; others have not. But it is not for individual mothers alone to overcome these barriers; it is up to society to eliminate them. Only then will women have a real choice about how to feed their infants. This presentation argues that modernity has set up these barriers to breastfeeding by systematically dismantling the systems of nurture that have supported mothers and infants throughout human history, including postpartum customs passed down from grandmothers to later generations. Breastfeeding should not be viewed as a lifestyle choice favoured by wealthy well-educated women, but as the great leveller, smoothing out the effects of growing social disparities in health and reducing the effects of social inequalities in our communities. Anthropology can provide a radical yet realistic science-based argument that we have much to lose from turning away from our mammalian heritage, for our children and for future generations.

Key Messages

- Breastfeeding fulfills critical nutritional, immunological and relational functions. We know a great deal about the nutritional functions of human milk but are still learning about breastfeeding's immunological functions; the social and relational functions have received less attention.
- These functions cannot be met by industrially produced substitutes. Infant formula will never be as good as human milk, but it could be improved.
- Breastfeeding develops the social sensibility that gives humans the capacity to engage in social life.
- Breastfeeding is skilled work for mother and infant, an intricate and intimate dance unique to each pair. There is no one right way to nurture a newborn.
- Determination and effort are sometimes not enough. Mothers need support, particularly in the absence of traditional postpartum customs.
- Customs that supported mothers and newborns have been disrupted by political and economic conditions, as well as by modernity's focus on the separate autonomous individual.
- We may never have scientific evidence for all the benefits of breastfeeding because we cannot experiment on infants, cannot separate out all confounding variables and as a living substance, human milk constantly changes.

Resources

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