

If Breast Is Best, Then What Are We Arguing About?

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Before I begin, allow me to assure you that I am prepared for the complete onslaught of comments that will be sure to accompany this piece, because anytime you talk about breastfeeding and formula feeding, the claws are bound to come out.

But that, my friends, is exactly what I would like to address today —

Why exactly *are* we so emotional about breastfeeding vs. formula feeding? And why is there a “vs.” there in the first place, like it’s some kind of war?

Why is it that we feel the need to proclaim one or the other as a “personal choice,” preface our statements about them with a disclaimer that we are not judging, and have companies make commercials to try to convince us that we all just need to get along nicely, like we are squabbling kids on the playground?

It seems to me that by reducing the issue of what we feed our babies to this highly charged emotional issue, that we are missing the big picture. We appear to be at a crossroads of sorts

— we churn out the mantra, “Breast is best — except when it’s not right for you,” and I can’t help but wonder what that message is really saying.

Are we saying that babies drinking breast milk really is just a “personal” choice that we want moms to feel good about, or are we saying that breast milk is scientifically, unarguably, a healthier choice for babies and as a nation, and as a parenting unit, it is our goal to be able to provide that choice for as many babies possible?

In short, are we saying that we are hiding behind the breastfeeding vs. formula feeding debate as a shield for our own insecurities as parents? Proudly waving our nursing covers, our bare boobs, or our bottles in an “I do what works for me” mantra of modern parenting, when really we should all calm the heck down and stop making it about *us*?

Breastfeeding does not automatically make you a great mom, nor does formula feeding mean that you’re a failure. But in making the discussion more about our worth as parents and drawing a big “X” around the topic with a no-judging marker, I’m afraid that we’re running circles around creating solutions that could only benefit us and our babies.

Listen, I think we can all agree that as parents, most of us want to nourish our children to the best of our abilities. In theory, it’s my goal to be able to provide my children with 100% fresh, locally-sourced, organic food all of the time — sometimes I make that happen, other times that’s just not possible for me. But I don’t flaunt my choices around, whether they be McDonald’s or grass-fed beef, nor do I feel like it’s somehow part of how I will be evaluated as a parent. I appreciate the work of individuals who are pushing for legislation that will incorporate healthier foods into our schools, workplaces, and everyday lives, and I know that acknowledging what’s best for our bodies is the first step to bringing more of the good stuff our way.

So why are we so hesitant to do the same with breast milk? Obviously, formula is not evil and it’s life-saving in many circumstances but if breast milk really is best — as even the formula cans proclaim and studies show over and over again — why are we also so hesitant to talk about the reality of how to *provide* that option for more parents who aren’t able or don’t want to physically breastfeed? Why do we make it about offending parents or damaging a mother’s delicate self-esteem instead of breaking it down into the very basic fact that we are talking about food here. *Food*. We don’t get to have “breast is best” and “whatever works” beliefs equally, because either one is healthier, or not. You can’t have both.

I think a lot of the problem comes from the fact that we subconsciously equate formula as a sort of “second-best,” a consolation prize for the mom who “failed” on some level. We put breast milk up on some pedestal, as if only the most dedicated, most fully functioning, most attached mothers can make it work, so therefore we have to pat the backs of formula-feeding mothers and reassure them it will be ok. It’s silly, of course, because formula isn’t poison— it’s still food and I hope it did its job or else I’m in trouble because not a drop of breast milk went into this writer’s body.

Breastfeeding is “natural,” but nature isn’t perfect. There are adoptive mothers, mothers battling cancer during pregnancy, mothers with chronic illnesses who need medication to get through the day, and even mothers whose babies are allergic to their own milk.

You could bet your boots that when I couldn’t nurse my daughter after I was hospitalized with an infection three days after she was born that I was just darn grateful there was another option for her to freaking eat. And trust me, I get it that right now, there is a mom whose mental health is hanging on by a thread directly connected to that bottle and that there is a mom whose baby has been losing weight and when he finally sucks down a bottle of formula, she will just want to weep with relief. Let’s face it — most parents are just happy to survive on a daily basis and aren’t really considering what our long-term goals for infant health are as a nation. I get that, I do.

But might it be helpful for us, as mothers, as parents, as a nation, to decide just what our collective goal is when it comes to feeding our babies. **Do we want to decide that what you feed your baby *is* just a personal choice and either formula or breast milk are perfectly equal or do we want to decide that breast milk is the preferred choice and actually make that more realistic for moms who can’t or don’t want to breastfeed?** It all seems pretty simple to me when you strip away the emotions that are latched (sorry, couldn’t help it) to the issue of our babies’ first food — could we come up with more realistic solutions that could support more babies getting better options? Is it possible to take away the emotional aspect of the “breast is best” movement and look at it from a basic health perspective instead of an integral part of a mother’s worth — and decide how we can best collectively support the millions of moms that struggle with or don’t want to choose breastfeeding? What would our efforts look like?

Could we demand more from the formula manufacturers because we are refusing to settle for “good enough?”

Could we push for more tax breaks for breastfeeding mothers?

Could we offer a financial incentive to mothers who could donate breast milk? Perhaps more than the current dollar an ounce rate?

Could we support more regulated milk banks? Googling “buy” or “sell” breast milk landed me at this suspicious looking site as the top result and I would definitely not feel safe purchasing milk from a site that looks — and operates — just like Craigslist, with strangers selling directly to each other. Currently there are only 13 actual operating milk banks in North America and only one actually pays women to provide breast milk.

Could we make it easier to actually obtain donor milk? Right now, with the limited amount of donor milk available, it’s reserved for babies in need, such as premature infants or those who are severely ill and it can even require a doctor’s note. Or, maybe we could pass some sort of law so that men with gross fetishes or men who just want more energy aren’t the ones buying it all up? (No, but for real.)

In the end, I can't help but wonder if it's possible to make having access to safe and affordable breast milk just as easy as reaching for that can of formula for the parent who can't — or chooses not to — breastfeed.

And to all those who proclaim that breast is best, I just have one question —

So what are you going to do about it?

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