

Director's Corner

Pact's Point of View on Adoptive Breastfeeding

by Beth Hall

In Summer 2010, Pact's Point of View published a cover article on adoptive breastfeeding along with a personal testimonial from one of our staff members about how it can work—and a photograph of an African American infant feeding at the breast of her white adoptive mother. We know that there is value in reminding/informing the adoption community that breastfeeding is an option for women who have not given birth to their children, something that many of our readers might not know is possible. Breastfeeding under the circumstances of adoption is an emotionally loaded issue: for adoptive parents it can be seen as another example where they are seen by society as the second-best of “less-than” parent; for birth parents who have placed their children for adoption, it is sometimes seen as a prerogative that should be exclusively theirs so that adoptive breastfeeding can feel like another way their role and relationship to their child may be minimized or devalued. Many important considerations that I will attempt to address here.

Is breastfeeding better than bottle feeding?

One of our readers wrote:

“I felt emotionally impacted (negatively) by this section— on the one hand, it feels like it's supposed to be giving you permission to not have to do everything right, but on the other hand, it's saying that if you can't breastfeed, you're going to have to mourn that too. Again? You've hopefully already mourned it if you mourned not being a bio-mom, and now you have to mourn it again because you're supposed to try to breastfeed your adoptive baby? I wanted to read, somewhere in the article, and I don't feel like I did: not all adoptive families decide that breastfeeding is an important way to bond with and nurture their child.”

Well said! It is not Pact's stance, nor is it my personal belief, that breastfeeding is either better or the only way to attach to an adopted child. We know that there are many voices in the world that say otherwise, holding up breastfeeding as a somehow integral piece of mothering and seeming to undermine the validity of all mother-child relationships that do not include this experience. This is a chorus we have no interest in joining.

In adoption, so much of our vision of parenting has to change if our original image involved bio-children. Each of us must ask ourselves if we are holding onto somewhat-attainable

pieces of that vision because we are afraid that adoption is inherently second-best. Might breastfeeding become a goal because it mimics the “ideal” of biologically-based parenthood and minimizes the “difference” of the adoption experience? Just as we must fight heterosexist and racist messages when they imply that the way of the majority is always best, we must also fight adoptism. That said, every mother deserves the right to make an informed decision and they should know that breastfeeding is possible for adoptive mothers and can be a means of promoting attachment for adopted babies, if you choose to pursue it.

Is breastfeeding healthier?

There does seem to be evidence that babies are healthier if they drink human milk rather than formula. Of course this does not mean that if they are not fed human milk they are not healthy, just that a large group of human-milk-fed babies were generally healthier than a large group of formula-fed babies.

There is evidence that suckling at the breast is healthier than drinking from a bottle. The mechanics of suckling from the breast are very different than drinking from a bottle (different muscles are involved). The position of the baby is also different. Not breastfeeding may impact children in several ways, but remember these are not automatically true, but rather issues that might be impacted in bottle fed babies without monitoring:

- Increased risk for speech impairment because breastfeeding prepares the appropriate muscles for speech.
- Decreased vision development because in breastfeeding babies are positioned on both sides to feed, stimulating the eye “on top.”
- Increased obesity because breastfeeding makes it easier to teach babies to listen to their bodies to determine when a feeding is finished.
- Increased malocclusion, because the firm nipple on a bottle or pacifier can cause the palate to become more high and narrow, leaving less room for teeth.
- Increased dental caries, because formula can pool in the baby's mouth whereas the baby cannot extract milk from the breast without suckling (which includes swallowing). Plus, the mother's nipple reaches so far back into the baby's mouth that the milk bypasses the teeth.

Is breastfeeding therapeutic for trauma?

Suckling at the breast is more calming and soothing than suckling at a bottle or pacifier. I often tell mothers that “breastfeeding is so much more than milk.” There is evidence that touch in general reduces stress, but of course breastfeeding is not the only form of touch that parents can practice with infants. Infant massage and close holding while feeding have been scientifically proven to help infants and babies overcome stress and promote health, including the reduction of cortisol and increasing levels of oxytocin. These methods for keeping babies happy and healthy can be used with or without breastfeeding.

Babies thrive by being nurtured. Not feeding a child when he or she is hungry, not offering comfort when a child is disturbed or distressed, or limiting body contact during feeding, throughout the day, and during stressful parts of the night: these are the things that interfere with long-term child health. In terms of therapeutic impact, “breast or bottle” is certainly less important than the quality of the interactions that caregiver and child have in a consistent, ongoing way.

Are there negatives to adoptive breastfeeding?

Adoptive parents who understand the benefits of open adoption for their children are often concerned with preserving what can be a somewhat fragile relationship with their child’s birth mother. It is worth noting that many birth parents struggle with the idea of adoptive breastfeeding. Perhaps breastfeeding is one of the few things that they feel they can hold onto proprietarily, similarly to carrying the child in pregnancy; learning that the adoptive mother is breastfeeding can make some birth mothers feel as if they are being written out of a relationship with their child. Of course this is not universal, but often pre-adoptive mothers have decided to pursue breastfeeding without input from their child’s birth parent, which can be perceived as a form of claiming meant in part to minimize or exclude the significance of the birth parent.

Also, if breastfeeding is seen as the “best” way to promote parent attachment with an adopted child, then “failure” can seem like a recipe for a failed adoption. This is completely unfounded in research or anecdote. Given the already ambiguous attitude of society regarding the legitimacy of the adoptive connection, adoptive parents certainly don’t need any new reasons to feel they are not “real” parents or that their



connection to their child is not authentic, any more than they need to feel excluded from the possibility of breastfeeding their adopted child if that feels to them like a positive way to support the relationship they are developing.

Racialized views of breastfeeding.

We heard from an African American pre-adoptive mother:

“I received Pact’s Summer/Fall 2010 Newsletter last month. I was eager to read the cover article on Breastfeeding Your Adopted Baby, something I myself am interested in trying. The photo on the cover with a white breast with a black child suckling was shocking! I am completely offended by this image. To me, the racialized image implies that transracial adoption takes priority over same-race adoption. It is hard for me to believe that you intended such a message to be conveyed. I feel it is important that you know how strongly I feel about this image and hope you find this information helpful.”

I was very grateful for this feedback. I began to search for the type of images the reader describes above. I had no idea how racially imbalanced the imagery of breastfeeding is. A recent Google search for images of “breastfeeding” resulted in 156 photos, of which 140 portrayed white babies feeding at white breasts. Of the sixteen remaining images that seem to represent infants and women of color, seven were of people in traditional garb from non-Western countries, three appeared to be Latino, two appeared to be Asian, and four appeared to be African American—of which only two showed actual breastfeeding. (This situation is further complicated by traditions of personal modesty and fiercely guarded privacy in many communities of color, which is hugely influenced by a long history of violation and exploitation.)

As an acknowledgment of this racist imbalance, as a validation of the beauty of the mother-child relationship expressed during breastfeeding in the context of the African American family, we know that the display of photos of women of color breastfeeding an important counterpoint to the often white dominated view of breastfeeding in America.

Ultimately, Pact supports connected parenting that is both honest and child-focused. It is our belief that this can be accomplished with either breastfeeding or bottle-feeding. Whichever you pursue, it is always worth pushing yourself to ask deeper questions about motivation and assumptions.