

## 5 Ways Partners Can Support Breastfeeding Moms (A Dad's Perspective)

Written by Danny Pitt Stoller

Friday, 01 June 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 18 January 2019 09:22

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When I read articles and stories about breastfeeding, I frequently come across the comment that breastfeeding leads to a diminished role for the dad. After all, if only Mom can feed the baby, how will Dad get a chance to bond with his child? This comment always surprises me, because my experience wasn't like that at all. I have two sons, and both of them breastfed. (They subsisted exclusively on breast milk for the first six or seven months, and continued nursing for a significant period after solid foods were introduced.) At no point did I ever feel excluded, nor did I feel I had a lesser or unimportant role in my children's lives.



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I'm certainly not the perfect dad, but I think I was successful at finding ways to stay involved during the period when my children were breastfeeding. Here are five of them. (Please note that, while I am drawing on my own experiences as a father, these same points apply to partners regardless of sex, gender identity, etc.)

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### 1. Bonding with Baby

When I was home with my first baby (I took time off from work during the early weeks), I was holding him virtually all of the time. I wore him in the baby carrier, holding him close against my body as I did chores around the house. I rocked my son to sleep, and napped on the couch with him lying on my chest.

My son was exclusively breastfed during this period, so I had no role in feeding. Nevertheless, the closeness and physical bonding between us was constant. I would hand him off to Mommy just when he was hungry, and he would nurse. He nursed almost constantly at the very beginning, but soon there would be a couple of hours between nursing sessions so there was plenty of play time with Daddy!

There were phases when the baby would get very fussy in the evenings. He would cry at the breast and get too worked up to breastfeed. My walking and rocking him would help him calm down, and he'd be more ready to nurse.

As he got older, we developed a bedtime ritual that included both Mom and Dad. I would walk him in the carrier to get him ready for sleep (I had a special Daddy walk that always made him drowsy)—after a while he would mumble, “Mommy milk” or just “Mama,” and then I would lay him down on the bed to nurse.

### 2. Tending to Mom (and the House)

Apart from bonding with the baby, you can support breastfeeding by helping make sure Mom's needs are met. Nursing moms can get extremely hungry and thirsty. You know how pregnant moms frequently comment that they're “eating for two”? Well, nursing moms are eating for two as well! When the mom and baby are comfortably positioned on the couch or in an armchair, it is a major inconvenience if Mom has to get up and fix herself a meal. Frequently bringing her food and drinks can be an important way of helping the breastfeeding happen.

Along the same lines, there are a thousand things to do around the house and, ideally, the new mother shouldn't have to think about any of it. If you're a dad who does 50 percent of the housework, you probably think you're doing a pretty good job. But in this case, 50 percent won't

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cut it! When the baby is nursing, that's a great time for you to pick things up off the floor, do the laundry, wash the dishes. Run to the store for diapers, groceries, whatever. Errands and household chores may sound trivial, but they're not. Taking care of these things is what makes it possible for the mother to do what she's doing.

### 3. Advocating for Mom – At Home

In the early weeks and months, you may have a lot of visitors. Friends and relatives want to see the new baby! That's great, but remember that the mother is recovering from the major event of birth, and adjusting to her new life as a mom. She probably doesn't want to jump up and play hostess, and she may not want visitors at all. Even relatives who come to "help" are probably going to be less helpful than they think. I'm not saying you should reject all offers of help, but you need to check in with your partner before you invite the whole tribe to come and spend the afternoon— and you need to say no to things when she feels too overwhelmed. Listen to her feelings, protect her privacy, and respect her need for a quiet space.

Also, breastfeeding itself is a hot topic and, as we all know, everybody has an opinion. Your father, mother, sister, brother, her best friend, and others are probably going to tell you what they think (about how long to nurse, how often, when and where to do it, etc., etc.). That's fine, but don't let extended family interfere with your family's process of making decisions. Never let the new mother be pressured, shamed, judged, or bullied into any choice about parenting. Be her advocate. When she feels too tired or too overwhelmed to speak up, you need to be the one who has listened to her and can speak on her behalf.

### 4. Advocating for Mom – In Public

Public breastfeeding. This is a topic unto itself and, again, everyone has an opinion. The fact is, during some phases (for instance, a growth spurt) infants feed almost constantly. So if the mother is going to leave the confines of home at all, that baby will need to nurse. (And no, not all babies will take a bottle.) It is the mother's right to nurse her baby anywhere, anytime, and she needs to do it in the way that is most comfortable—covered or uncovered, according to mom and baby's preference.

So what is the partner's role here? Again, you need to advocate for mom. If she is feeding the baby in public, there is a chance she will be bothered or harassed by someone (it happens all too frequently). The mother in this situation may feel vulnerable or even embarrassed, and you can make it your job to stand up for her. Make it very clear that she is within her legal rights, and

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that interfering with her is a form of harassment. (I hope it's clear that I'm not saying you should speak for her when she's perfectly capable of speaking for herself! But there may be moments when she wants a partner to do the talking.)

There also will be moments when she wants to be extra discreet (for instance, if she notices someone staring). You can create a wall of protection by sitting right beside her. (Not that she needs to be discreet, but in certain cases this may be what she prefers.)

### 5. Supporting the Breastfeeding Relationship

So you are her advocate within the family, within your circle of friends, and among strangers in public. Here comes the sensitive part. You need to be her strongest advocate and biggest supporter, even when there's no one else around. You can support what she is doing just by having a positive, healthy, encouraging attitude about breastfeeding.

I've talked about the way moms can be bullied or shamed by people they know, and by strangers in public. Unfortunately, sometimes the shaming and the judgment come from the woman's own partner. Not all dads are fully supportive of breastfeeding, and this can be a real obstacle to making it work. If the dad harrumphs, rolls his eyes, or just zones out whenever the mom is nursing the baby, how will she feel? How can she be confident that he'll give her the moral support to get through any challenges that may come?

Some dads actually feel threatened by breastfeeding. The father may feel that the baby has somehow replaced him, that there are no more special cuddles for him, that his partner's body—her breasts—have transformed, from a source of sexual excitement to...something else.

Well, it's true that things will change, at least for a while. After nursing all night and day, there's a good chance the bleary-eyed mom won't want to be touched right now. But don't fear. Remember, it's your child that is getting all this love and attention and nourishment. Feel reassured and happy that your precious child is getting the best your family can provide.

And you're hardly being replaced. This is an opportunity for you to step up and be an amazing husband and father; if you do, you will be more important to your wife than ever. And as for

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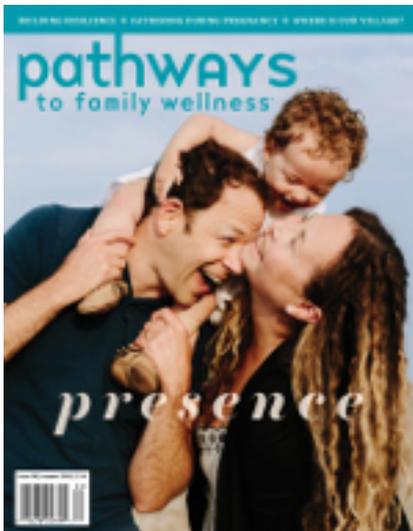
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those special cuddles between you and your partner—don't worry, that will come back too. If you focus on being her partner and her unwavering advocate, your relationship (including the romantic part) will almost certainly deepen and blossom.

As I've said, I am not perfect. (I could definitely take some of my own advice regarding housework!) There's no such thing as a perfect mom or dad. But I feel proud of the ways I've helped care for my children, including the ways I have supported breastfeeding.

One of the things that helped me was having a great role model. My own father has shown me how wonderful a loving, nurturing dad can be. What makes me proudest of all is the thought that I am passing this on to my own two sons, raising boys with healthy attitudes about love and nurturing, men and women, and how all of us as a family can support each other.



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