Throughout our history, the incidence of mothers breastfeeding their babies has run the spectrum from feast to famine. Very long ago, nearly every mother breastfed; nature obviously had a good plan. More recently, breastfeeding became unfashionable, and “proper society” would not even consider it. Many only breastfed if they could not afford a wet nurse. Mothers today often approach breastfeeding with ambiguity, and fathers are having an influence on their decision.

Research has shown that 98.1 percent of mothers working outside the home breastfed when fathers were completely supportive. However, when fathers were indifferent, mothers only breastfed 26.9 percent of the time.

Who are these fathers, and what is the best way forward for mothers, fathers and babies?
Father’s Perspectives

I have gotten into trouble with generalizations in the past. But in the interest of discovering the archetypal picture, I will risk making a few. Some fathers think less is best, and the sooner he gets “his” breasts, and his wife, back, the better. The father in this position may make his opinion known, thereby creating influence over the crucial mother/child breastfeeding and bonding relationship. There is also a “shadow” inherent here, indicating uncertainty as to where bonding with Dad will come from.

Other fathers remain indifferent, standing back and deferring to the mother to “let her make her own choice.” While seemingly acceptable, such a stance might have the effect of Dad feeling excluded—even if he excluded himself—and therefore missing out on potential benefits of his own. This approach could also lead the mother and child to not being as well provided for as they could be.

Lastly, there are fathers and mothers who make joint decisions regarding breastfeeding, and both “participate” fully.

Studies reveal that a father’s hormonal activity increases during his partner’s pregnancy, and more so if he is present at the birth and closely involved after. When a father is intimate with his child, especially through skin-to-skin contact, his oxytocin production increases. Elevated oxytocin in a father is recognized as a key component in jump-starting and maintaining his nurturing instincts and bonding with his baby. Hormones are chemicals secreted by an endocrine gland, triggered by nerve cells that regulate the function of specific tissues or organs. They are essentially chemical messengers that transport signals from one cell to another. In a way, they tell us what to do and how to act.

Prolactin, vasopressin and oxytocin are among the hormones that are found at higher levels in men around the time of birth. Increased production of prolactin is known to promote bonding, attachment and caring. Raised vasopressin levels cause a man to want to protect his family and
be at home, rather than on the prowl in search of a mate. (Vasopressin is also known as the “monogamy hormone,” fostering commitment.) Oxytocin is also produced in men and women during loving contact. Because of this it has been called “the hormone of love” by experts such as Dr. Michel Odent, Sheila Kitzinger and Dr. Sarah Buckley. It is also a necessary hormone for a mother’s body to produce in order to ensure a successful pregnancy and labor, and it plays a role in breastfeeding, as well. Since couples are already in the habit of producing oxytocin during intimacy, fathers can contribute this dimension of their relationship to the mother’s labor and breastfeeding time.

The Importance of Father Love

Consequently, father love, added as an ingredient to the scientific recipe of mother’s labor and breastfeeding, can be a useful enhancement. The result of this increased hormonal activity is that bonding, attachment, protection, love, loyalty, commitment and caring are all enhanced in new fathers. Science shows us that a father with close, strong, intimate contact during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding will be supported by Mother Nature during his early engagement in the family. This then establishes a more durable foundation for a lifelong loving relationship between father and child, and indeed, for the family itself.

While nutrition is an important part of the breastfeeding equation, it is hardly the only component. Perhaps the biggest misconception is that some form of artificial milk, or even bottlefeeding breastmilk, can actually replicate breastfeeding.

A mother’s breastmilk is specific to her baby and adapts to her baby’s ever-changing needs hourly, daily, and even monthly or yearly. These needs are physical, mental, emotional, social and developmental. If food comes from a bottle instead of a breast, many of these crucial components are hindered or lost. In addition, as Veronika Robinson says in her book, The Drinks Are on Me, “Breastfeeding is a sacred art. It opens our soul and brings us to a place which connects generations past with future generations.”

For the majority of mothers, a significant key to her successful pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding is the quality of care she receives from the father. When the father cares for the mother, he is most certainly caring for his child as well. What is the potential for a father’s contribution to his family, and what benefits might he derive, during this intimate time between a
mother and child? A father can carry out virtually any and all other forms of caretaking for a new baby. Plus, if a dad is regularly skin to skin with his baby, they both benefit.

Jamie, father of 13 month old Zephyr, reports, “The breastfeeding connection is beautiful; I love watching the joy on Zephyr’s face as he sucks away into bliss. I have bonded with Zephyr very well. I have always spent a lot of time with him and we are regularly skin to skin. Now, I am running around the woods, playing, cuddling and supporting him to be free spirited. I don’t feel ‘on the side’ at all. We both have different connections with him and they are equally strong.”

Mothers and babies need to continue their close, intimate relationship that began in the womb; the child’s security depends on it, and breastfeeding is a big part of appropriately meeting this need. It is important that dads understand this and differentiate their role in early parenting. It is no accident that dads are dissimilar to mothers, and their approach life and parenting are uniquely different. Mothers need to remember that, while they are the gatekeepers to the baby, it is important they support Dad’s way of being with his new baby.

Elmer is the father of 4-year-old Lucien, who still breastfeeds a couple of times a day. “What a gift for me as an adult male to be around my son as a living example of abundant security. Lucien having extensive breastfeeding seems only to have supported his intelligence. Our sense is that his knowing he can connect with his mother has helped him feel securely attached and it will also simply come to an end when it does. His other life transitions have taken place in their own time, as this one likely will, also.”

An added bonus of a bonded father/child relationship is that the life expectancy of the family is enhanced. Fathers who do not feel included and part of a family will tend to leave, one way or another. This is reflected in our current culture of divorce and separation. A father who is attached and committed to his children is more likely to stay with his family. Science is on his side, and nature and nurture are working in harmony. When a man’s nurturing instincts and hormones are awakened, everyone wins. As a culture we have the responsibility to see to it that our fathers and children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Mothers and fathers can embrace breastfeeding together, and each will have a higher level of satisfaction during the time of early infancy and family bonding.

The transition to fatherhood is one of the most significant and challenging experiences a man will ever encounter. In order to have a satisfying and successful experience, fathers must feel safe, supported and confident. To optimize the possibilities for our families, we need to provide
appropriate and gender-specific educational, physical and emotional support for fathers.

About the Author:

Patrick M. Houser is the author of the Fathers-To-Be Handbook, a road map for the transition to fatherhood. He is also a freelance writer, keynote speaker and a parenting and childbirth professional educator. Visit FathersToBe.org.