

Hands that Itch to Hold the Spoon

Written by Amy Bentley, Ph.D.

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After World War II solid baby foods began to replace breastfeeding. Here's how it happened.

More often in this postwar period, embedded in discussions of infant feeding were assumptions about civilization, progress, convenience, and modernity, assumptions that were conflated with whiteness and socioeconomic privilege. Advice givers, doctors, mothers, and manufacturers pointed to the “civilized” nature of an infant’s early consumption of solids along with formula. After all, it was implied, there was something backward, even distasteful, about the alternative—that is, breastfeeding one’s infant in mid-twentieth-century America.

NUTRITION

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The sexualization of the breast, already under way by the nineteenth century, was accelerated by the World War II pinup girl posters, postwar soft porn such as Playboy magazine, and the popularity of such Hollywood icons as Marilyn Monroe. The result created an iconography of the breast as a source of infant nutrition. As breasts became more sexualized they became less functional, more the domain of men as a source of food. As this transformation continued, breastfeeding, especially in public, became less normal and more taboo, and by midcentury most Americans attached a vague sense of disgust to the practice. Now that breasts were primarily viewed the idea of women breastfeeding infants, especially in public but even in private, felt abnormal and destabilizing. Modernity apparently did not include breastfeeding women, by implication breasts were the men and men.

By contrast, societies with strong breastfeeding practices tended to be developing countries, many populated with nonwhite populations. Such societies, not surprisingly, were apt to be more tolerant of exposed breasts and breastfeeding in public, one of many factors that caused some Americans to deem them less civilized in comparison to the United States and other first world nations. To most Americans the idea of exposed breasts and suckling children elicited too much discomfort, was too reminiscent of the dark-skinned women from developing countries depicted in full color on the pages of National Geographic. “Proper breastfeeding and care of the baby is essentially a primitive activity,” he reasoned from modern practices,” observed the medical philosopher Levin, in other words, our modern, technologically advanced society has rendered breastfeeding obsolete. In fact, it was commonly thought that Western women were less able to nurse their infants because of the stresses and strains of modernity, the demands of “civilization” that made bottle-feeding necessary and early weaning of adults more likely. Indeed, there was something “civilized” about baby food—not only Gerber, which held a majority of market share, but Beech-Nut, Heinz, and Clapp’s brands as well. Formula and commercial baby food became conflated not only with civilized society in this period, but with whiteness as well. This was in contrast to the ambivalent conflation of dark skin, breastfeeding, and primitivism—a potent, disorienting amalgam of ideas regarding progress, efficiency, modernity and civilization. Advertising that featured only Caucasians usually confirmed the association, as not until the 1970s did African Americans appear in baby food marketing campaigns.

Moreover, to exist on an all-milk diet (whether breast milk or formula) denied of solids seemed almost subhuman. Cultural mores as well as basic scientific understanding at this time found breast milk and liquid formula to be lacking, and they were deemed incapable of adequately nourishing even young infants. The goal, for doctors and others, was to eliminate an infant’s dependence on milk as soon as possible. Babies did not need to be “nourished by archaic dietary restrictions,” observed Levin of the practice. “The word of solids illustrates the truism that babies are human.” The notion that “human-ness” could be signified by ingesting solids implied that breastfeeding, or even formula feeding, denoted that one was “non-human,” or “less than human.” Such a bifurcation, which by analogy reflected postwar global assumptions, was telling.

By contrast, adults, particularly commercially prepared baby food, were modern, life giving, and efficient, the latter an especially valued quality in postwar America. “Among the greatest nutritional contributions

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to our civilization,” declared Lillian Salzman, R.D., in a 1973 article titled “Not by Milk Alone,” “are commercially prepared vegetables and fruits for infants sold by manufacturers such as Gerber’s, Beech-Nut, Clapp’s, and Heinz.” According to Salzman, among their chief virtues was that they were “efficient time savers.” Moreover, “all vegetables are so finely mashed, top infants have no trouble masticating and digesting even a fibrous vegetable like green beans.” Top infants who ingested green beans as soon as possible would be all the better for it—in would be society, unconcerned by primitive feeding methods in its search for greater efficiency.

There was a cultural and economic imperative in the mastery of solids. Not only the mastery but the early ingestion of solids implicitly signified the wealth and power of the United States, its culture, and its people. Because “solid foods often (that is, solids are expensive)” observed Levin, “this reliance of feeding is unsuitable for those classes and classes who cannot afford to purchase good food for their babies.” In fact, for Americans early solids seemed to contain an air of inevitability: “The progressively earlier age for the introduction of mixed feeding is not a food fad but an historical culmination of an historical trend. It is an inevitable consequence of man’s gradual mastery—very rapid in recent years—of food technology.”

In addition to commercial baby food the material artifacts and cultural meanings surrounding them were central to the crafting of infants. Under the early twentieth century influence of Hall and Watson there had been a similar crafting of infant feeding practices, strict allowable and rigid rules taboos. In the post-World War II era such rules as feeding children with a spoon—some with their hands—and hoping to have full meals a day seemed vitally important. “The three meals a day schedule is a development of civilization,” declared Dr. Za Salk, who promised mothers that their babies would be holding down three squares at seventeen days. “Introduction of these new foods usually means that

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The sexualization of the breast, already under way by the nineteenth century, was accelerated by the World War II pinup girl poster, postwar soft porn such as Playboy magazine, and the popularity of such Hollywood icons as Marilyn Monroe. The result created an incongruity of the breast as a source of infant nutrition. As breasts became more sexualized they became less functional; more the purview of men as sexual objects and less the domain of infants and as a source of food. As this transformation continued, breastfeeding, especially in public, became less normal and more taboo, and by midcentury most Americans attached a vague sense of disgust to the practice. Now that breasts were primarily sexual the idea of women breastfeeding infants, especially in public but even in private, felt abnormal and destabilizing. Modernity apparently did not include breastfeeding women; by implication breasts were for men and sex.

By contrast, societies with strong breastfeeding practices tended to be developing countries, many populated with nonwhite majorities. Such countries, not surprisingly, were apt to be more tolerant of exposed breasts and breastfeeding in public, one of many factors that caused some Americans to deem them less civilized in comparison to the United States and other first world nations. To most Americans the idea of exposed breasts and suckling children elicited too much discomfort, was too reminiscent of the dark-skinned women from developing countries displayed in full color on the pages of National Geographic. "Proper breastfeeding and care of the baby is essentially a primitive activity...far removed from modern practices," observed the medical philosopher Levin; in other words, our modern, technologically advanced society has rendered breastfeeding obsolete. In fact, it was commonly thought that Western women were less able to nurse their infants because of the stresses and strains of modernity, the downside of "civilization" that made bottle feeding necessary and early feeding of solids more likely. Indeed, there was something "civilized" about baby food—not only Gerber, which held a majority of market share, but Beech-Nut, Heinz, and Clapp's brands as well. Formula and commercial baby food became conflated not only with civilized society in this period, but with whiteness as well. This was in contrast to the midcentury conflation of darkness, breastfeeding, and primitivism—a potent, disturbing amalgam of ideas regarding progress, efficiency, modernity, and civilization. Advertising that featured only Caucasians visually confirmed the association, as not until the 1970s did African-Americans appear in baby food marketing campaigns.

Moreover, to exist on an all-milk diet (whether breast milk or formula) devoid of solids seemed almost subhuman. Cultural mores as well as basic scientific understanding at this time found breast milk and liquid formulas to be lacking, and they were deemed incapable

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of adequately nourishing even young infants. The goal, for Sackett and others, was to eliminate an infant's dependence on milk as soon as possible. Babies do not need to be "surrounded by archaic dietary restrictions," observed Levin of the practice. "The use of solids illustrates the truism that babies are human." The notion that "human-ness" could be signified by ingesting solids implied that breastfeeding, or even formula feeding, denoted that one was "non-human," or "less than human." Such a bifurcation, which by analogy reflected postwar global assumptions, was telling.

By contrast, solids, particularly commercially prepared baby food, were modern, life-giving, and efficient, the latter an especially valued quality in postwar America. "Among the greatest nutritional contributions to our civilization," declared Lillian Saltzman, R.D., in a 1953 article titled "Not by Milk Alone," "are commercially prepared vegetables and fruits for infants sold by manufacturers such as Gerber's, Beech-Nut, Clapp's, and Heinz." According to Saltzman, among their chief virtues was that they were "efficient time-savers." Moreover, "all vegetables are so finely mashed, tiny infants have no trouble swallowing and digesting even a fibered vegetable like green beans." Tiny infants who ingested green beans as soon as possible would be all the better for it—as would be society, unencumbered by primitive feeding methods in its search for greater efficiency.

There was a cultural and economic imperative in the mastery of solids. Not only the mastery but the early ingestion of solids implicitly signified the wealth and power of the United States, its culture, and its people. Because "solid foods other than cereals are expensive," observed Levin, "this scheme of feeding is unsuitable for those cultures and classes who cannot afford to purchase good food for their babies." In fact, for Americans early solids seemed to contain an air of inevitability: "The progressively earlier age for the introduction of mixed feeding is not a food fad but an historical culmination of an historical trend. It is an inevitable consequence of man's gradual mastery—very rapid in recent years—of food technology."

In addition to commercial baby food the material artifacts and cultural foodways surrounding them were central to the civilizing of infants. Under the early twentieth century influence of Holt and Watson there had been a similar ossifying of infant feeding practices: strict schedules and rigid rules regarding which foods were allowable and which were taboo. In the post-World War II era such rules as feeding children with a spoon—never with their hands—and keeping to three full meals a day seemed vitally important. "The three-meals-a-day schedule is a development of civilization," declared Dr. Sackett, who promised mothers that their babies would be bolting down three squares at seventeen days.

"Introduction of these new foods usually means that [baby] must master a more grown-up method of eating ...cups, spoons, knives and forks are a part of civilized custom," the childcare experts the Aldriches told their readers.

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Spoons in particular became important markers. An infant is born with “hands that itch to hold the spoon,” the Aldriches informed readers. Baby food advertisers reflected this notion as well: “How soon does Baby get Meat? Almost as soon as he starts eating from a spoon,” went a 1950 Gerber ad in the magazine *Baby Talk*. “The introduction to spoon-fed foods is a Big Event in Baby’s life. Starting him on Gerber’s Cereals is a very good way to begin,” went another. Along with his note of congratulations Beech-Nut president John Grammer sent to each new mother a coupon for two free jars of baby food and an offer for a long-handled spoon, “just the right size and shape for Baby’s tiny mouth.”

Mothers, too, valued the spoon as a marker of progress and civilization. Women returning home from the hospital with their newborns enjoyed and came to expect free infant spoons along with the formula, baby food jars, and bottles sent by the baby food manufacturers. Just as breastfeeding felt primitive and unnatural in midcentury America, so did eating with one’s hands, or letting one’s child eat in such a manner. Utensils signified wealth, civilization, and education. Until the child was old enough to use a spoon itself, culture dictated that mothers, or fathers when available, seat their infants in a high chair and feed them with a spoon. Two researchers studying early infant feeding noted that of the almost 80 percent of infants who received solids before the first month, “the cereal was almost always offered by spoon and only rarely added to the bottle.”

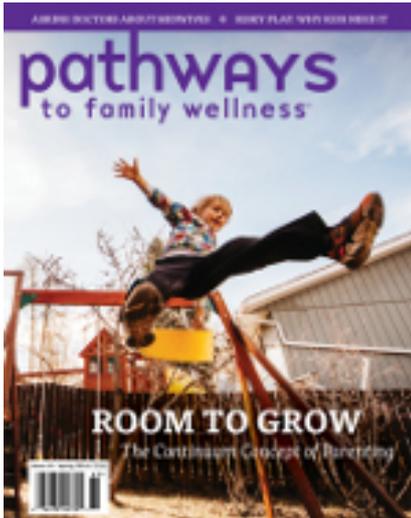
Infant spoons along with solid baby food thus came to symbolize a set of assumptions about postwar American society and infancy. Not only were metal (and later plastic) spoons a popular gift for newborns, but drawing significance from the centuries-old idiom “born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth,” elegant silver infant spoons from Tiffany’s and other exclusive retail establishments also were a favorite gift, as were silver infant spoons etched with the image of the Gerber Baby. Just as a much earlier era featured the iconic Madonna and Child portrait of a mother leaning toward and cradling her (often breastfeeding) child in her arms, mid-twentieth century baby food advertising commonly featured its own version of the Madonna and Child: a young, beautiful Caucasian woman, her hair perfectly coiffed and lips stained dark red, smiling lovingly at her baby as she readies to nourish her infant with a spoonful of rice cereal, mashed peas, or strained bananas.

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