What is the father’s role in breastfeeding?

This article will combine a review of what has been found in the literature about the role of fathers in breastfeeding with ponderings and ideas based on the author’s own experiences both as a father and as a trained father-group leader in Sweden on involving fathers more in infant feeding.

Even in cultures where most fathers have little interest in or knowledge about breastfeeding, they and the maternal mothers may often have a great deal of power over how mothers feed their babies. Studies in Taiwan, Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, Israel, Spain, Brazil, Sweden and PA, NY, MD, MO, GA, in the USA suggest that a father’s approval of breastfeeding (or the mother’s perception of this) is associated with greater breastfeeding success. In one study in OH, USA, strong approval of breastfeeding by the father was associated with 98% breastfeeding incidence, compared to only 26.9 when the father was indifferent to feeding choice.

In many of these studies, others’ opinions were not found to have any influence. And I have not come across studies where the opposite is true— that others’ opinions had an impact but fathers’ did not. In one study, pregnant women were asked whose opinion mattered the most regarding feeding their infants and 79% said “baby’s father” compared to 21% “maternal mother.”
One review suggested that fathers influence the following four aspects: the breastfeeding decision, assistance at first feeding, duration of breastfeeding, and risk factors for bottle feeding.

In one study in TX, USA, compared with fathers whose partner planned to bottle feed, fathers whose partners planned to breast feed were less likely to think that breastfeeding is bad for breasts (52% vs 22%), makes breasts ugly (44% vs 23), and interferes with sex (72% vs 24%). Yet surprisingly mothers’ predictions were little more accurate than random guessing in predicting their partner’s response to attitude questions about breastfeeding.

Most studies find that although fathers of breast-fed babies know more about breastfeeding and have more positive attitudes toward it than other fathers, their level of knowledge is still low. Presumably, fathers’ knowledge and attitudes could be improved and they could play a more positive role, though few documented efforts have been made so far to do so.

Can we create a new norm regarding the father’s role in infant feeding—before the infant formula companies succeed in doing so? One small study in the UK found that “One of the most significant factors influencing the decision to bottle feed appears to be a desire for paternal involvement.” In Sweden I am attempting to promote the idea that the father’s role after six months of exclusive breastfeeding could be “chief solid feeder.” From the very beginning, Dad can act as a “kangaroo,” as his body is just as good as an incubator at maintaining infant body temperature.

Does breastfeeding make fathers feel left out? In Hungary mothers who believed this were less likely to breastfeed. Jordan and Wall found that fathers’ concerns about breastfeeding included the lack of opportunity to develop a relationship with their child, feeling inadequate, and being separated from their mate by the baby. Gamble and Morse identified the process that enabled fathers to accept the disparity in the types of relationships that their children had with each of their parents as a result of breastfeeding, and called it “postponing.” It includes becoming aware of the disparity, simultaneously developing accepting strategies and acknowledging reinforcing factors, and, finally, developing compensating behaviors to increase the fathers’ interactions with their infants and promote closer relationships.

An idea is emerging among people concerned about promoting exclusive breastfeeding in patriarchal cultures where the mother-in-law has almost complete power over how a baby is fed.
How about educating the father about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding and seeing if he can “protect” his child’s mother against his own mother? Such efforts must be pursued with care and evaluation of outcomes, however. In Yemen an attempt to do breastfeeding promotion through fathers was ended when it was found that some fathers demanded that mothers switch immediately to breastfeeding at risk of divorce and that some others, when they found out the birth-spacing impact of breastfeeding, brought home bottles to their wives.

References:


