

Breastfeeding, Culture, and Attachment



In countries all over the world women adapt their feeding practices to their own circumstances and the environment they live in. Women adapt to their infant's needs, and infants adapt to their mothers' availability. It is important to note that in every culture, there are circumstances where a mother cannot breastfeed, and also, mothers who choose not to breastfeed for multiple reasons (Small 1998).

Cultural tradition influences:

- Initiation of breastfeeding

Initiation and continuation of breastfeeding is influenced by a complex interplay of culture, social support, and socioeconomic status (Agnew et al. 1997). In most countries, where breastfeeding is widely practised, a mother begins to breastfeed right after birth. Until recently, this was discouraged in Western hospitals by separating mothers from their newborns soon after birth for long periods. This practise had a very negative effect on successful breastfeeding as the infant's sucking reflex is strongest within the first 30 minutes after birth. It is instinctually and biologically triggered and if interrupted during the critical 30 minute period, the whole process of breastfeeding and its associated attachment benefits, can be disrupted (Small 1998).

For many cultural groups in Canada, breastfeeding is widely practised in their countries of origin, but when they come to Canada, they often change from breastfeeding to bottle-feeding. The perception of immigrant and refugee women is largely that formula feeding is the dominant and preferred form of infant feeding in Canada (Agnew et al. 1997). Even for those who want to continue breastfeeding, many find it difficult with the lack of family support, the lack of support for breastfeeding in the workplace, and the lack of acceptance of breastfeeding in public. There are also immigrant and refugee women who feel so strongly about the benefits of breastfeeding that they insist on it and find ways to incorporate it into their lives despite the lack of support in the workplace and in society as a whole.

- Frequency of breastfeeding

Long intervals between timed feedings, a lack of night feeding, and supplementation of mother's milk with other species' milk or artificial milk, is a recent pattern practised primarily in the West. In many non-Western countries, mothers feed on cue (in short intervals all day and night), and do not supplement their milk with any other type of milk (Small 1998). This difference is based on different beliefs regarding a child's needs. In the West it is generally believed that children need to learn to be independent almost from the time of birth. In non-Western countries it is generally believed that children are naturally dependent in their early years; that children need responsive relationships with family members.

- Duration and termination of breastfeeding

Cross-cultural data shows that it is only in the West that infants are weaned before one year of age. For 99 percent of human history, breast milk was the primary or sole food until two years of age, and nursing continued for several more years (Small 1998). This difference between Western and non-Western countries is also based on the difference in belief regarding infants' need to learn independence versus their need for responsive relationships.

In all cultures, weaning involves the introduction of solid food, and the gradual or abrupt cessation of mother's milk. The timing of weaning is influenced by cultural factors. Most non-Western cultures believe that children need to be breastfed until they are at least one year old. Weaning before this time is usually based on other factors. Some cultures have a taboo against nursing during pregnancy. So, if a mother becomes pregnant again, she will stop nursing. Some cultures have a taboo against sex during nursing, so a mother may wean her child to enable her to resume sexual relations (Small 1998).

In the West, early weaning is encouraged because it is seen as a sign of infant development - it is culturally frowned upon for a walking toddler to be breastfed. Early weaning also enables a woman to return to work earlier in an environment where there is limited support for breastfeeding in the workplace.

- Acceptability of breastfeeding in public

In North America and Western Europe, breastfeeding in public is not generally accepted. Even if women are determined to breastfeed, they are often uncomfortable exposing their breasts in public because breasts are culturally associated with sex. In many other countries, breasts are seen as functional, so it is not immodest for them to be uncovered. It is very natural to breastfeed in public and women are very comfortable doing so. Some cultures may have a taboo against women breastfeeding in the company of men.

- Family and community support for breastfeeding

Many cultures (Africa, South Asia, Latin America) have a 30-40 day postpartum rest periods for new mothers, where family (immediate and extended) as well as community members step in to help mother with other household tasks so that she can focus on feeding and caring for the new baby.

Culture also influences other factors, which in turn affect breastfeeding:

- How often a child will be held or carried and how a child will be carried

In North America, and Europe, many people believe that children can be spoiled by being carried too much. In many countries outside of North America, mothers and other family

members carry children in some form of sling for much of the day. This enables mothers to respond quickly to a child's cues that s/he needs to be fed.

- How a child and mother will be clothed

In North America, women's clothing is usually not very conducive to breastfeeding. In many countries outside of North America, mothers are dressed in loose fitting clothes that are easily adjusted to allow breastfeeding to take place.

- How a family will sleep (together or apart).

In many countries outside of North America, children sleep with their parents, in the same bed, or at least in the same room. This enables mothers to breastfeed numerous times during the night, in response to her child's cues.