

## How to Succeed at Breastfeeding When You're the Father

By **Gina Kruml, RN, BSN, IBCLC** .....

**M**ost fathers hope that breastfeeding will work out for their new babies. But is there anything the father can do to improve the odds? Other than hope for the best and support the mother, what's a father to do?

**Let your partner know you hope breastfeeding goes well.** When's the last time the two of you talked about breastfeeding? Perhaps you've never talked about it, but you're pretty sure she'll breastfeed. Maybe you really hope she wants to breastfeed, but you don't want to seem pushy. True, this is one issue that you ultimately won't be deciding yourself, but letting your partner know how you feel about breastfeeding can actually be a big help. A study of 1,059 mothers in Australia showed those who stated their partner preferred breastfeeding over formula-feeding were significantly more likely to be breastfeeding when they took their baby home from the hospital, and more likely to keep breastfeeding (Scott, Landers, Hughes, & Binns, 2001).

**Research breastfeeding ahead of time.** Don't stop with just an article or two. Read a good book about breastfeeding such as *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*. This can help you become an in-house expert for your partner. A study of 601 couples by Susin et al. (1999) showed babies whose fathers had more breastfeeding knowledge had more chance of being breastfed longer.

Breastfeeding may be natural, but it isn't always easy, especially at first. If any difficulties arise, you can be a great help if you know who to call or what can be done. Attending a breastfeeding class along with your partner can help you both. You'll feel reassured knowing the signs that baby is getting enough milk. You'll learn about many benefits of breastfeeding that you may not have known before, which can help both you and your partner stick with breastfeeding, even if there are difficult times.

**Consider hiring a doula.** A doula is a woman who assists the mother during and shortly after birth. She doesn't perform a medical function but provides support to help your partner feel more comfortable during labor. The doula is not a replacement for the father's presence; rather, she provides experienced help and suggestions. After birth, many doulas stay to help with breastfeeding if needed. Sometimes people hire doulas to help the mother at home during the first days postpartum.

What connection does a doula have with breastfeeding success? One of the main advantages of doula care is the lowered risk of a cesarean birth. This can help toward breastfeeding success. Doulas also help mothers to advocate for the birth plan they want. Skin-to-skin contact immediately after birth and very little if any separation from the baby has proven to start breastfeeding off on the right foot. Doula care can help make this more likely. And, even though nurses and lactation consultants are available to assist with breastfeeding, doulas provide one-on-one care and are never down the hall with another client.

**Stay with Your Partner and Baby after Birth.** Those first hours with your new baby are priceless for many reasons. You, your partner, and the baby are bonding as a new family. Breastfeeding is hopefully getting off to a good start. A study of 488 Swedish women (Ekstrom, Widstrom, & Nissen, 2003) showed for first-time mothers, continuous presence of the father immediately after birth, for several hours, was associated with longer months of breastfeeding for the baby.

**Help without a bottle.** During the first few weeks, while recovering from childbirth, your

partner may need every bit of sleep she can get. While it might seem helpful to offer to give the baby a bottle of formula so she can sleep, resist the temptation. Giving a bottle may cause latch problems, and breast milk is the right food for the baby. As well, studies have shown that adding formula bottles to the baby's day or night will not result in better sleep for the mother. (Montgomery-Downs, Clawges, & Santy, 2010).

Maybe you've heard other new fathers happily explain why they never have to get up with their new baby at night—the baby's breastfeeding, so there's no need. This often works out to be the case, but don't expect this to necessarily happen at first. If the mother can pass the baby to you after a feeding, you can take care of burping, changing, rocking, and patting, while she goes back to sleep.

**Be prepared to put in the time.** You might be tentatively planning to go back



to work right away after the baby's birth. However, try to build some flexibility into those early days, even if it seems like everything is going well at first. Even when you are back at work, you will still be able to help your partner with breastfeeding by stocking the refrigerator each morning with lunch and snacks for her. By feeding the mother, you are indirectly feeding the baby, too.

If difficulties arise with breastfeeding, your time and assistance are very important. Your partner will definitely appreciate your concern and a listening ear. If she needs to see someone for help, she may want you to be present for the visit. In certain circumstances, the physical act of breastfeeding can be a challenge, such as when starting out with breastfeeding twins, or if your wife is recovering from a cesarean birth. In these cases, arranging to take time off from work in order to assist with positioning baby can be the reason breastfeeding succeeds. There might also be the need to pick up a hospital-grade breast pump, or make frequent trips to the health care provider to have the baby weighed. At first, it might seem that breastfeeding is a challenge for everyone involved, but with your help and encouragement, this difficult time will pass quickly.

**Keep up the support, even when things are going well.** By the time your new baby is six to eight weeks old, breastfeeding is usually going well. That doesn't mean your job as a "breastfeeding father" is complete. Continue to support your partner's breastfeeding efforts in whatever way you can.

For instance, encourage her to attend mother-to-mother support group meetings such as La Leche League, and mark meeting dates on the calendar. Attending such meetings is often key in helping women to breastfeed long term. If extra time in the family schedule is needed to accommodate breastfeeding,

let your partner know you understand and will make time for breastfeeding. For example, long car trips need to include time for breastfeeding breaks. If your partner feels uncomfortable about breastfeeding in public, or around other people, help her find a way to breastfeed that is comfortable for her. Let her know that you feel comfortable with her breastfeeding wherever she is comfortable doing so.

A study of 203 new mothers in Scotland (Swanson & Power, 2005) showed the partner's support of breastfeeding was especially important when their babies were about six weeks old. The mothers who rated their partners as supportive of breastfeeding were more likely to continue nursing as they start going out more in the community.

**Grow a special bond with your baby.**

Your relationship with your baby is very important. Some new fathers might feel left out. You are such a big part of your baby's

life, though. Your baby knows your voice, even from the time she is in the womb. A father develops a special relationship with the baby, different from the mother's. For instance, the baby might fall asleep easily in the father's arms with a certain hold or a certain lullaby, but the mother might not be able to duplicate this. Learning about other aspects of baby care, such as babyproofing the house, baby massage, baby sign language, etc. might be your focus while your partner spends more of her time breastfeeding.

Best wishes to you and your new family as you begin your adventures as a breastfeeding father. Breastfeeding is such a gift to your new baby, but it is not only a gift from the mother. It is also a gift from you, since you help to make breastfeeding a success. □

Editor's Note: For a complete list of references cited in this article, please send your request to [nbeditor@llliusa.org](mailto:nbeditor@llliusa.org).



Expectant and new fathers may be interested in these additional reading recommendations:

- *The Birth Partner* by Penny Simkin
- *Fathering* by Will Glennon
- *Fathering Right from the Start: Straight Talk about Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond* by Jack Heinowitz
- *Fatherwise: 101 Tips for a New Father* by Alice Bolster
- *Mothering and Fathering* by Tine Thevenin
- Fathers and Breastfeeding article collection (LLLI website): <http://www.llli.org/nb/nbfathers.html>

Gina Kruml, RN, BSN, IBCLC, edits "Focus on Fathers" and is interested in hearing from fathers about their experiences with their breastfed children. Send your stories to [nbeditor@llliusa.org](mailto:nbeditor@llliusa.org). Gina and her husband, Joe, live in Sierra Vista, Arizona, with their children Sophia (14), Ambrose (9), Maria (6), and Victor (7 months).