

The Manly Art of Breastfeeding

By Kelly Crull



My wife, April, has had a book called *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* lying on the coffee table for the last week or so. I haven't touched it. Not because I think the topic of breastfeeding is off limits for fathers or that it's repulsive or that there's nothing I can contribute to the conversation since I don't have the right equipment.

The truth is April and I have thought so much about breastfeeding in the last two weeks that I'm ready to spend my time thinking about anything else—even that leaky showerhead in the guest bathroom that's been taunting me for ages.

Still, I feel compelled to write something about breastfeeding for fathers. I want to do you a favor. I want to give you a heads up. So listen closely.

There will come a time when your wife will be lying there—in my case April was in her hospital bed—with as much ambition as a rug and as much emotional and intellectual stability as a Chihuahua. In that very special place, she will come to a point of such desperation

that she will ask you to please say something or do something to make this little creature eat. Believe me, even if you don't have anything brilliant to say, you'll want to say something. Mostly because you're not interested in finding out the consequences if you don't, but also because this is your wife and this is your baby, and if there's any time that you've ever been needed in your life, it's right now.

I had been wondering about breastfeeding for months. I wondered what was the big deal. Why did we spend three childbirth classes on breastfeeding? Why did every baby book have at least one chapter dedicated entirely to breastfeeding? And what about La Leche League: an entire organization just for breastfeeding mothers? It all seemed over the top.

That is, until that second night at the hospital.

Alleke had been squirming in our arms for hours—from seven o'clock the previous evening until two o'clock in the morning—and we were lost for ideas. Our brains were ringing, set off balance by the contrast

between our quiet hospital room and the screams of our little girl, which sounded a lot like shattering glass.

We had a hungry baby, and we did not know what to do with her.

At that moment I realized that learning to breastfeed is like that recurring dream where I find myself simply falling from the sky towards earth. I slice through the air like a bullet, the trees and roads and cars on the ground coming too quickly into focus. I realize then that I'm actually holding on to what looks like a parachute; at least, I think it's a parachute. It's not on my back, it's in my hands, and I've never parachuted in my life, but I better do something because the seconds are spinning away.

What makes breastfeeding difficult is it happens all at once. The moment your child is born, he or she begins losing weight. You have somewhere between three to five days for mother and baby to learn how to connect that breast to that little mouth.

Instinct gets you a long way, but beyond that, you're on your own. I've never been in a situation where I've seen anyone learn something so complicated so quickly as watching my wife and daughter learn to breastfeed together. Breastfeeding is like renting a vehicle with a stick shift for your family vacation without having ever driven one before and deciding you'll figure out how to work the clutch along the way—while you're winding through the mountains in a national park somewhere.

If I had had the money, I would have given every cent of it to our midwife, Carmen, to have just stayed there with us, sitting on the end of April's hospital bed, coaching us and stroking Alleke's head with her quieting midwife touch, until we had figured out how to feed our baby. I would have even run home and baked Carmen chocolate chip cookies. That's how much I wanted her to stay with us when she stopped in our room during her hospital rounds.



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So what about the father then? Well, for starters, just be there. Your wife just needs you to sit there on the couch and look helpless.

Believing in miracles helps, too. Your wife will tell you breastfeeding the baby is impossible, and she'll give you the baby, and she may even pout or cry or scream, but when the time is right, hand her the baby again. Tell her she's capable and that you love her.

Don't think about the future. Don't beat yourself up by thinking about having this little baby with you tomorrow and the next day and the next day. Just think about now. About what your wife needs now and how to get her to believe she can feed this baby.

And if you can find the courage in yourself to do these things, my friend, you've mastered the manly art of breastfeeding.

Postscript

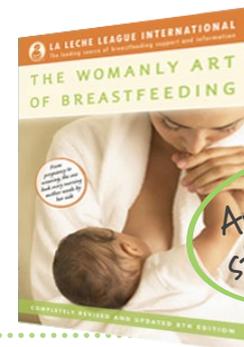
Five years later, April is due with our third child. Guess what? I'm still thinking about breastfeeding. Why? Because my children loved breastfeeding. However, all that sweetness didn't come without big challenges: bruising, cracking, bleeding, tears, worrying about our daughter losing weight, fumbling around with a nipple shield, and being bothered by bad advice from friends. Yet, when I asked April to think back on those difficult times she said, "What got me through was knowing it gets better. In a few months, you'll love it."

So my advice now that I have more experience is that when your wife, with tears in her eyes, hands you the baby, find this magazine, flip to this page, and show it to her. Say, "Look at what this woman said. She said it gets better soon, and it'll even be easy, and you won't even need to think about feeding your baby." April went on to breastfeed both of our children, and every time they nursed it was like they were having their own little tea party with all the giggles and smiles that go along with playing together. □

*Kelly Crull is a Spanish bullfighter, or at least his kids think so. He's also the author of *Becoming Dad: A True Story of One Man's Transformation from Clueless Husband to Involved and Nurturing Father*. Kelly and his wife, April, live in Madrid, Spain, with their children, Alleke (5) and Teo (2).*

Photo on page 18 courtesy of Kelly Crull.

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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 focus.on.fathers@llusa.org Gina and her husband, Joe, live in Sierra Vista, Arizona, with their children Sophia (15), Ambrose (10), Maria (7), and Victor (1).