Is Slavery Why Black Women Aren't Breastfeeding?

by Kimberly Seals Allers  posted Monday, May 18, 2009

In the first of a series, Kimberly Seals Allers explores this phenomenon in search of answers.

Kimberly Seals Allers: When it comes to breastfeeding, black mothers have somehow lost their way. For over 30 years, African-American women have had the lowest breastfeeding rates, and though the numbers have greatly increased in recent years, black moms still have the lowest rates of all ethnicities. And when it comes to the gold standard of infant nutrition -- six months of exclusive breastfeeding -- among African-Americans, the rate is only 20% compared to 40% among whites. At a time when black infant mortality rates continue to climb to woefully high levels, momlogic and MochaManual.com take a deeper look at why more black mothers aren't breastfeeding, and urge moms to give their infants the healthiest start.

Slave Owners Purchased Us As Wet Nurses

To get to the bottom of this breastfeeding business, it's important to go back. Waay back. A long time ago, black women were notorious for nursing. In fact, slave owners used and purchased black women as wet nurses for their own children, often forcing these mothers to stop nursing their own infants to care for others. "On the one hand, wet nursing claimed the benefits of breastfeeding for the offspring of white masters while denying or limiting those health advantages to slave infants. On the other hand, wet nursing required slave mothers to transfer to white offspring the nurturing and affection they should have been able to allocate to their own children," writes historian Wilma A. Dunaway, in the book The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation, published by Cambridge University Press. And since breastfeeding reduces fertility, slave owners forced black women to stop breastfeeding early so that they could continue breeding, often to the health detriment of their infants, Dunaway writes.

Breastfeeding is for Poor People

But there's more to our story than breastfeeding interrupted at the hands of slave owners hundreds of years ago -- though many may argue that some vestiges of slavery still exist in the mindset of the black community. Aggressive marketing by the formula companies in the 1930s and 40s made formula-feeding the choice of the elite -- "the substance for sophisticates" -- white or black. And who doesn't want to be like the rich and famous? That marketing continues to this day, down to the formula company-sponsored bag of goodies you probably received on the way out of the hospital. Then there's something I call the National Geographic factor -- that is, most of the images we see of black women breastfeeding are semi-naked women in Africa whose lives seem so far away from the African-American lifestyle and experience.

"Breastfeeding is for poor people," my mom once said to me," explains Nicole, a 37-year-old mom from New Jersey, who breastfed two children for a year. "My mom is a very progressive woman, but this was the thinking of her generation. I couldn't believe it.'

Breastfeeding Hurts and Takes Too Long

As children of that generation, many modern mothers don't have that breastfeeding legacy or support from their mothers, mothers-in-law, or extended family members. And due to the oversexualization of the breasts, some women have forgotten or are even uncomfortable with using the breast for its actual intended purpose. Go figure! Others worry that their man will complain (please tell him baby comes first). Myths such as "breastfeeding hurts" (truth: only if the baby is not latched properly) or "breastfeeding is too time-consuming" (truth: whipping out a breast is a lot quicker than sterilizing bottles, mixing,
measuring, or heating up formula) still linger among black mothers.

Throw in the economic pressures that put many black women back at work soon after delivery, and there’s a “why bother” mentality that makes breastfeeding seem more like a challenge and a chore. The results speak for themselves. According to national data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 45% of African-American women breastfed their babies during the early postpartum period, compared to 66% of Hispanic mothers and 68% of white mothers who breastfed during that same period. Of African-American women who do choose to breastfeed, the duration is short, with many discontinuing in the first days after birth, their data shows.

"Before I nursed my son and daughter, none of the women in my family had ever breastfed before," says Kathi Barber, founder of the African-American Breastfeeding Alliance and author of The Black Woman's Guide to Breastfeeding. "But I decided change would start with me when I learned breastfeeding has health benefits for mothers and babies alike."

We Owe It To Ourselves and Our Babies

And while modern white mothers have reclaimed breastfeeding as hip and trendy, with help from outspoken and high-profile celebrity moms like Angelina Jolie, black celebrity mothers are still mostly mum on the topic. As a new generation of confident, empowered black mothers, we owe it to ourselves and our babies to give them breast milk — the very best. According to the CDC, black babies are twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday. A 2001 study in Pediatrics concluded that an increase in African-American breastfeeding rates alone could reduce this disparity. To do so, every black mother needs to become our own celebrity spokesperson (hey, we're beautiful with full lips!) to speak out and speak up to encourage and support breastfeeding in our own sister circles. It begins with you.

What do you think? Discuss in our Community.

Kimberly Seals Allers is an award-winning business journalist and founder and editor-in-chief of MochaManual.com, a weekly online magazine for moms of color. She is the author of "The Mocha Manual to a Fabulous Pregnancy" and "The Mocha Manual to Turning Your Passion into Profit." Kimberly is a divorcing mother of two and lives on Long Island, NY.

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Mommy22 MAY 18, 2009, 10:59 AM

I am a black woman and a young mother when I decided to nurse my daughter many women in family told me I was crazy and that they would never ever do that. I breastfed for over a year and my daughter gets less colds and illnesses than any kid I know. I dont know if its all from breastfeeding but I do know that she has gained many benefits from it as did I. I encourage all women regardless of race to at least give it a try.

Anonymous MAY 18, 2009, 11:25 AM

great article thank you for shedding light on this issue.

Anonymous MAY 18, 2009, 11:25 AM

maybe because they get formula for free

Sue MAY 18, 2009, 11:32 AM

Who Cares? As long as Mom and baby are healthy and happy. Breastfeeding doesn’t make you the better person; and not doing it doesn’t make you bad.

Heather MAY 18, 2009, 11:55 AM

Sue, it is important because breastfeeding reduces a babies risk and a mother's risk of many health issues. It is great that we live in a society where mothers can make decisions regarding infant nutrition and be generally healthy either way, but when an entire population has a low incidence of breastfeeding, it raises questions as to whether that population has the appropriate information on infant nutrition.
to this, I had a C-section AND the baby had low blood sugar at birth and the physician immediately took her and fed her
(and other female relatives) didn’t breastfeed. Since I was never breastfed, my mother could offer no advice. In addition
properly, you can see that I had a hard time with breastfeeding. In addition to this, I am a first time mother, whose mother
afraid the medication would negatively impact my baby. If you couple that with the fact that my child would not latch on
numerous operations on various parts of my body, and had to resume medication immediately after giving birth. I was
ROUGH pregnancy and an even harder delivery. Before I became pregnant, I had high blood pressure, anemia, and
American mother who, unfortunately, did not breastfeed. However, it was not by choice. I am fairly unhealthy, and I had
I am one of those people and, needless to say, I feel overwhelmingly guilty about not breastfeeding. I am also a African-

Great article, Kim! I have studied a ton of history, and you are right on target, but you also have to consider the people who
bother me too much, but I often think how hard it must be for young black mothers in this community to choose
breastfeeding and then, to sustain it for extended periods of time. There just is no or little support for it here that I can
see.

But your article has helped me be more understanding of the generational thinking. I feel like it makes more sense now.
Next time, one of the older ladies says something, I will feel less attacked and try to be more patient. I’m glad to have
read this.

Thanks!
Kim
www.theyummymummy.blogspot.com

I have a two year old and I started off breastfeeding but had to stop because of minor health complications with my son.
But when I think back to when I told my mother I was going to breastfeed she seemed like “well if you want to but, I didn’t”.
My ML when I told her she seemed a bit disgusted. Like it was the nastiest thing she had heard of. Now it makes a
little more sense, it has become clear to me what was going on in their minds. My parents grew up in the old south in
Arkansas and Mississippi. She is a dead ringer for what me and my husband call “slave mentality”. Some of the things
that come out of her mouth are appalling as to how they thought in those days. I try my best to get her to see and think
a little more sense. It has become clear to me what was going on in their minds. My parents grew up in the old south in

The Yummy Mummy

Great article.

I’m white and I have both breastfed and bottle fed my 2 kids. I live in Harlem (NYC) - a predominately African-American
community and I have been surprised by the anger and vitriol that my breastfeeding has inspired. Older black women
think nothing of chewing me out on buses and parks or being ignored and inappropriate.

They are not merely passing along their comments, they are truly un-nerved and angered by it. I try not to let any of this
bother me too much, but I often think how hard it must be for young black mothers in this community to choose
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I have 2 kids - a son, 3 and a daughter, 10 months. I breastfed my son for 6 months. I wanted to do it longer but wasn’t
able to with the lack of a lactation room at the job I had at the time. I’m still breastfeeding my daughter and plan to do so
until she is 1 year. My husband has Type 1 diabetes and I want to make sure that my kids have the best nutritional start. I can
say that their immune systems are AWESOME! They rarely get sick and are happy little ones. It was a personal
choice for me. It is budget friendly and has great benefits. I would encourage any woman to consider breastfeeding. It is a
bonding experience that is unforgettable.

I have 4 children, and I breast fed all of them. They were not close in age, and I enjoyed the one on one time I spent during
the time I breast fed them.

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that come out of her mouth are appalling as to how they thought in those days. I try my best to get her to see and think
differently but somehow its ingrained. So it would not surprise me at all if somehow some way this breastfeeding issue
has a vestige leftover from slavery.

Great article, Kim! I have studied a ton of history, and you are right on target, but you also have to consider the people who

I am one of those people and, needless to say, I feel overwhelmingly guilty about not breastfeeding. I am also a African-
American mother who, unfortunately, did not breastfeed. However, it was not by choice. I am fairly unhealthy, and I had
ROUGH pregnancy and an even harder delivery. Before I became pregnant, I had high blood pressure, anemia, and
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(and other female relatives) didn’t breastfeed. Since I was never breastfed, my mother could offer no advice. In addition
to this, I had a C-section AND the baby had low blood sugar at birth and the physician immediately took her and fed her a
breast to "get her sugar back up". My baby has a "TYPE A" personality, so once she had been given a bottle, it was very hard to "convince" her to have patience for the breast. I had a far different experience from those mothers who get to hold and breastfeed their babies as soon as they arrive. So what do you do next? You ask for help, which I did. Only, the lactation nurse told me that they would get to me "when they can" because the hospitals are severely understaffed. They claim that first priority goes to premies who "desperately need" to be breastfed, and since my baby was well over 9 lbs, at birth, they felt like she would be okay with formula or I would just "figure it out". I tried for six weeks straight, and... well... it just never happened for us.

naila  MAY 18, 2009, 3:41 PM

Because of slavery! that's like saying the white man made me do it...mis information, a need to return to the work force faster, and lack of education about the benefits and ease of breastfeeding those reasons, I can see... but slavery, not so much.

Almost all of the black women I know are choosing to breastfeed, myself included, and those that aren't are making a personal choice that best suits their individual situation, not their color.

winkgline  MAY 18, 2009, 3:48 PM

Breastfeeding has many healthy, emotional and psychological benefits to both mother and baby. Many mothers I have spoken to have given reasons for formula-feeding, among them are: baby keeps longer between feedings, feedings take less time, it is easy to measure the amount of milk baby consumes, baby refused to take breast, baby still seemed hungry after breastfeeding. These reasons conclude a lack of information about Black women on breastfeeding and contribute to the disparity in health between minorities and whites.

Renaie  MAY 18, 2009, 4:32 PM

naila, that was exactly what I was thinking, well said.

Jewelle MAY 18, 2009, 4:33 PM

As a black woman with 2 beautiful young girls (ages 5 and 2), I must say that I didn't realize how pervasive this mentality still is within the African American community. Also, being from a West Indian background, where this was (and often is) the norm for many of the women (due to high prices of formula), I'm surprised when such negative messages come from even them. This act of breastfeeding is what I remember seeing growing up in my years living there so among other reasons, it was a very natural decision for me to want to do the same. I breastfed both of my girls - FOR 2 YEARS!!! (I recently began weaning my 2 year old) and I must say that I have also encountered the stares, the comments, the jokes and the lectures on why I should not have breastfed for so long as I did. Especially considering that my daughter is so "old", I'm made to feel that I should be embarrassed or ashamed at my choice to continue for this long. This has been verbalized on more than one occasion. While I realize that it is not the norm for many African-American (or even just American) women to breastfeed for this long, I do believe that the choice to not only breastfeed but on how long to breastfeed is a personal choice and no one should be told that they should be ashamed/embarrassed at my choice to continue for this long. I was however amazed to see how much my choice to breastfeed for this long seemed to bother many women so much, when it truthfully didn't bother me at all. I made a very conscious choice to breastfeed my children and though I did go past my initial 18 month decided period, I am very proud that I was able to selflessly give her (and her sister) this gift.

Another benefit of breastfeeding is that it replaces that time with other things but I am very proud that I was able to selflessly give her (and her sister) this gift.

Now, while I understand that for most women (black or white), 2 years is a lifetime when it comes to breastfeeding, it is important to do what works for you. My personal opinion is that to not breastfeed (if not for medical reasons) is to deny your baby the most natural (and as a result) the most healthy form of nutrition that he/she can get. While this is my belief I do not label (or judge) mom's who don't breastfeed as bad. I just wish that they had made a different choice to either explore it or prolong it. My first daughter went through her entire first year with not so much as a cold and I deeply believe that it had to do with the fact that I was taking great care to nourish my own body and was passing on that nourishment to her through my breastmilk. My second one while not quite a perfect first year (probably due to the fact that there is another child around to pass around the germs), still has had a pretty good run with her overall health.

I think most importantly, a decision to breastfeed or not should be based on having the right information about the benefits for baby and mommy. Education is key and perhaps for some women in the African American community who are choosing to either not breastfeed (or to breastfeed for very short periods truly don't know or realize the tremendous health benefits (this may be due to a lack of knowledge, healthcare benefits or healthcare and financial resources). Otherwise I can't understand why someone would choose anything other than the best for their baby. It's a debate that will continue (breast vs. bottle) but as with anything with differing opinions, it should be approached with patience, sensitivity and understanding. This article will perhaps shed some light and even more understanding into the mindset to those on both sides of the fence. As I have made the decision to wean my second child (I decided I was mentally ready), I realize how much I will miss that time with her. (We were only doing 2 - 3 short feedings per day since she has been on solid food for some time and has quite a voracious appetite). Naturally we get to replace that time with other things but I am very proud that I was able to selflessly give her (and her sister) this gift. To those women who have not considered breastfeeding, urge you to consider trying it. It may provide you with an experience of which the memories will last a lifetime. And as a sidebar, getting some of that baby weight off isn't a bad incentive either (wink wink). My best to you all.

Niecy MAY 18, 2009, 4:55 PM

Kimberly, thank you for this post. I found it insightful and thought provoking. I experienced much of what you talk about. I come from a family of generations of women who did not choose to breastfeed, some who shared disdain for my choice to breastfeed. I truly believe this thinking is passed on generationally.

Although I continued to attempt to pump and feed him, my milk supply was not enough for my son, so I made the decision to place him exclusively on formula. I did not express or like I was less of a mother because I didn't breastfeed longer. I felt blessed that I had a healthy baby who was getting what he needed - whether from my breast or from the bottle.

The facts about the benefits of breastfeeding are strong and undeniable. I hope we continue to push this conversation out there and educate all mothers about giving their babies the best possible start they can have. Let's not look down on mothers who choose not to/are unable to breastfeed their children, but provide as much information as possible so they can make the best choice for them and their child.
I'm looking forward to trying again with my next child...whenever that may be.
Peace and Blessings,
Niecy Lunn

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