



The Importance of World Breastfeeding Week In My Piece of the World

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 Tuesday, August 3, 2010

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August 1-7 marks World Breastfeeding Week. The annual campaign, organized by the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, is the one week where over 170 countries worldwide pay attention to our breasts and their power to help our children.



Kimberly Seals Allers

Credit: Chandra Lanier

It's no secret that I'm a huge advocate of breastfeeding as one of the most important things a woman can do to give her baby the best start in life and give herself some unparalleled health benefits. And the Black Maternal Health Project proudly supports breastfeeding and is deeply committed to understanding how we can increase breastfeeding rates among black women.

So while the campaign, now in its 19th year, speaks to the entire world, I'm speaking directly to my part of the world. The African American women who historically have had the lowest rates of breastfeeding for the recommended time periods or don't breastfeed at all.

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 breastfeeding 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.

Some of these forces have been brewing for decades. 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 health detriment of their infants, Dunaway writes.

But there's more to our story than a stunted and complex breastfeeding experience 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.

To help remedy the global situation BAWA takes aim at hospitals and other maternity care providers. This year the campaign focuses on "Just 10 Steps--the Baby Friendly Way" showcasing the 10 steps hospitals need to do to encourage breastfeeding. Those ten points include:

- Have a written breastfeeding policy that is routinely communicated to all health care staff.
- Help mothers initiate breastfeeding within a half-hour of birth.
- Show mothers how to breastfeed, and how to maintain lactation even if they should be separated from their infants.
- Give newborn infants no food or drink other than breastmilk unless medically indicated.
- Practice rooming-in -- allow mothers and infants to remain together -- 24 hours a day.
- Encourage breastfeeding on demand.
- Give no artificial teats or pacifiers (also called dummies or soothers) to breastfeeding infants. (read all 10 points at www.worldbreastfeedingweek.org)

In our community, we need to talk and encourage each other more. And speak out. We still long for an African American role model in breastfeeding, like a Michelle Obama. In the meantime, if you are already on the breastfeeding bandwagon, tell others. Check out the "I Breastfeed Because . . ." campaign sponsored by Ameda, a leading breast pump maker. Mothers who are currently breastfeeding and or have in the past can log onto www.ibreastfeedbecause.com to upload 20-second videos that share the reasons why they chose to breastfeed.

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