

Working It Out: Encouraging nursing is good business. Here's how to convince your boss.

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Breastfeeding should be so easy and so widely supported. It's natural, inexpensive, requires no special equipment, and lulls even the fussiest infants to sleep. For the practical minded, it is also staggeringly cost-effective. Individual households can save nearly \$1,000 in healthcare costs during their baby's first year if the mother nurses. Nationwide, up to \$4 billion a year could be saved in healthcare costs, and \$93 million a month in lower food-package costs if all women nursed their babies.

The potential savings to businesses are almost as large. Women who continue to breastfeed after returning to work miss less time because of baby-related illnesses and have shorter absences when they do miss work, compared with women who do not breastfeed. Working mothers who continue nursing also have higher morale and, perhaps most interesting, tend to return to work earlier from maternity leave, presumably because they are less concerned about the effect of their return on the nursing relationship.

Why, then, is nursing so rarely encouraged or even allowed on the job? Only a tiny percentage of American companies provide new mothers with break time or with facilities for pumping, both of which are essential. A woman's milk supply is directly related to how much stimulation her breasts receive; in other words, the more a baby nurses, the greater her milk supply, and vice versa. If a mother is unable to breastfeed or pump sufficiently, she'll gradually lose her milk supply, which can result in her baby weaning prematurely. Also, if a mother is unable to express milk during the workday, her breasts will become engorged. This can result in the development of plugged ducts, which can lead to mastitis, or a breast infection, requiring the use of antibiotics and bed rest. In other words, she won't be able to work.

The best, long-term response to the issue of breastfeeding and working is legislation dealing with this issue. At present, only the state of Minnesota has passed a law requiring employers to reasonably accommodate breastfeeding mothers, providing them with break time and a room to express milk. California enacted a joint resolution of the legislature that calls on all employers to support and encourage working mothers who want to continue breastfeeding, recognizing that it benefits the employer as well as the mother and baby.

On the national front, Representative Carolyn Maloney last year submitted a federal bill (H.R. 3531) that would provide the most-extensive protection yet to working mothers, including one hour of unpaid leave time; a tax incentive to employers who provide a lactation-friendly environment; and an amendment to the Pregnancy Discrimination Act to clarify that it does apply to breastfeeding mothers. (For more information on breastfeeding legislation, see "Staying Abreast of the Law," *Mothering*, November/December 1998 and "Big Capital; Small Steps," *Mothering*, January/February, 1999.) While this bill hasn't yet become law, it does foreshadow the not-too-distant future. It heralds the inevitable arrival of a new, more progressive attitude on the part of businesses toward nursing.

For many of us, the very idea that a boss would forbid or discourage a woman from breastfeeding seems ridiculous. Don't most employers support breastfeeding mothers who return to work? Sadly, the answer is no. Breastfeeding has skipped several generations, and many people today view it as a "lifestyle" choice, not a health concern. As a result, employers don't see any need for mothers to continue breastfeeding when they return to work, viewing formula as much more convenient. Women bosses who did not breastfeed their own children may feel an implied criticism of their parenting choices when another working mother insists that she wants and needs to breastfeed.

In this context, breastfeeding-support legislation is a very positive step, a recognition by our government that breastfeeding is a basic act of nurture. Legislation also helps to change the public perception that breastfeeding is not important. But legislation is not enough. For one thing, none may be passed for several years, especially at the national level. In the meantime, women who wish to both work and nurse must find some kind of private accommodation with their companies, their direct supervisors, and their coworkers. This will require compromise on all sides. Keep in mind that nursing must be perceived by everyone as good business. You are not asking for special treatment, just for the ability to give your baby, yourself, and your company all the benefits that prolonged nursing can provide.

How can you convince your boss to help you continue nursing? Begin by sharing information about the fiscal and physical importance of breastfeeding, and about efforts to support mothers when they return to work. Tell your employers that many prestigious medical and children's-advocacy groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and UNICEF, strongly encourage employers to facilitate the continuation of breastfeeding when women return to work. In 1993, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) even prepared a booklet entitled *Women, Work and Breastfeeding: Everyone Benefits!* To receive a copy, contact your local La Leche League office. Get an extra copy for your boss.

Then sit down with him or her. If you are thinking of requesting an extended maternity leave to deepen your nursing relationship, keep in mind that there are two federal cases that denied such requests based on the current language of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. Consult an attorney before seeing your employer.

Most of the other nursing and employment-related problems fall into one of the following categories:

Being told that you cannot express milk on your regular breaks: This may constitute discrimination, especially if there are other employees who are treated differently. Can others smoke a cigarette or run an errand during breaks? You should be allowed to express milk during your scheduled breaks, even if the process makes some of your coworkers uncomfortable.

Having no place to express milk: Try looking realistically at where you could express milk at your particular workplace. Is there a room that isn't being used? Don't expect your company to find you a place. Find one yourself. Then try to convince your employer to let you use it. Unless you happen to work in Minnesota, employers are not required to accommodate you. However, if you offer a reasonable solution, presented with a persuasive smile, you should be able to convince your bosses.

Not having enough time to express breastmilk: If this seems to be the case for you, begin by looking at whether you could speed up the process of expressing milk. Some breast pumps are not intended for daily use by a working mother. Are you using a double kit to express milk from both breasts simultaneously? If you are having difficulty, seek help from your local La Leche League. If, after all this, you still feel your employer is not providing you with enough time, look at other options, with the aim of accommodating your work needs and your nursing needs. Could you perhaps shorten your lunch break to make time for other breaks when you could pump? Could you come in early or leave late to make up for the missed time? Ask your boss what combination of break times would be most acceptable, making it clear that you do not necessarily want extra time off, just a better combination of breaks.

In all situations, take a friendly, helpful, cooperative attitude. This will work much better than threatening to sue. Provide accurate information about the current medical recommendations and about breastfeeding's economic benefits. Look to see if your local or state breastfeeding task force has information on educating employers. Feel free to share information about Congresswoman Maloney's pending federal bill; you can download it at: www.house.gov/maloney/breast Tell them also about California's new Concurrent Resolution, which contains information about why employers should encourage working mothers to breastfeed. Call 916-319-2021 for a copy; ask for bill 155.

If all else fails, you can consider a discrimination suit. But do not forget that these are often expensive and time-consuming. Litigation and the judicial system are rarely going to provide as prompt a remedy as educating key people in a nonconfrontational way.

Most important, consider these issues while you are still pregnant and before you take your maternity leave. Look at what is and isn't feasible. Decide whether it would be beneficial to discuss the various issues ahead of time with your employer. Many companies are eager to retain and accommodate their valuable employees. If you show your bosses how nursing is beneficial for them, they should be happy to help you make things work.

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