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## I never doubted I would breastfeed my baby girl, but it wasn't so easy



For a number of reasons, African Americans are less likely to breastfeed their babies, but that could be changing, writes Natalie Moore.

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By [Natalie Moore](#)

When I was pregnant, I never doubted that I would breastfeed my baby girl. I foolishly thought nursing amounted to milk flowing out of my breasts like water out of a faucet. No one told me how much breastfeeding can hurt the first few weeks or hard it can be to find a good latch after leaving the hospital.

My mother didn't breastfeed me — like many of us born in the 1970s — so I couldn't lean on her to teach me techniques. I turned to a couple of lactation consultants in those early stressful days. Imani Barberousse came to my house and showed me how to better express milk.

“Every day is Black Breastfeeding Week,” quipped Barberousse, who's been counseling black mothers for 25 years. She is a mother of five and has nursed a total of 16 years.

An actual Black Breastfeeding Week does exist every August. Nursing is tough for moms of all races, and our society too often looks askance at public nursing, as if moms are titillating men with their anatomy rather than providing babies their first food. The pushback is real.

Then, shockingly, the Trump Administration earlier this year sought to water down a breastfeeding resolution on the global stage in what looked like pandering to the baby formula industry.

Racial disparities show up in breastfeeding.

In Illinois, 81 percent of babies have ever been breastfed, according to the state department of public health. For black babies, the percentage is 68 percent. These figures mirror national trends. In the U.S., the percentage of babies who have ever had breastmilk is 83 percent; for black babies it is 69 percent.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants be exclusively breastfed for about the first six months. Nursing moms refer to milk as liquid gold. Science and research consistently say breastmilk is the best for babies.

Organizers started Black Breastfeeding Week as an awareness campaign to up the numbers of breastfed black babies. Several reasons explain the current lower rates: a high black infant mortality rate, lack of diversity in the lactation field and cultural barriers. As far as the latter, black women's role as wet nurses during slavery adds to the complex history of nursing.

Slowly and surely, the stigma is dissipating.

In Chicago, Jenny LeFlore is organizing an event called Milk & Honey to honor Black Breastfeeding Week. Moms can get their portraits taken nursing their little ones at Build Coffee in Woodlawn, the site where LeFlore orchestrated a South Side nurse-in with a couple of dozen moms this summer.

LeFlore, the founder of Mama Fresh Chicago — a support group for new mothers that celebrates diversity — wants the moms to flood social media with their photos.

“The more people see it as normal and not shocking, it can open up the conversation,” LeFlore said. “Breastfeeding is a form of activism.”

“Normalize breastfeeding” is a mantra. Like me, LeFlore didn't have a mother to turn to for help.

“People say look at peer-to-peer support,” she said, “and that’s important.”

The generational cycle of not breastfeeding stands a better chance of breaking with peer counseling. That’s the philosophy of Health Connect One, which has been doing breastfeeding training in Chicago since 1986.

Program manager Tikvah Wadley says they started training black women when they realized that hospitals didn’t have black women giving that peer support to new mothers.

“One of the issues is the support that happens for women,” said Brenda Blasingame, executive director of Health Connect One. “That support needs to begin in the hospital the moment the baby is born for the mother to be encouraged to breastfeed.”

Blasingame said she’s heard that nurses don’t always push for black women to nurse because they don’t think they’ll have the support once they leave the hospital.

Chicago’s public health department is pushing health equity. The department has set a goal of ensuring access to care and support for mothers and babies to promote breastfeeding for the first six months. Health Connect One is a partner.

My personal breastfeeding journey is over. I persevered and nursed my daughter for almost two years.

The journey was not a singular one; a community pitched in. Nursing friends, women such as Barberousse and social media helped give me confidence and, in turn, helped me give advice to other moms. Informal peer counseling wiped away the tears. I grew less shy about breastfeeding in public, sticking my manual pump in my purse at all times.

Not to be boob flashy, but why should I go into a bathroom to feed my baby? Why create an environment where mothers feel they have to isolate themselves if they don’t want to?

I once nursed in a dive bar in New Orleans behind a stage. On an airplane. I tried to do so on a bench at an art museum in Chicago, and security told me I had to go in a private room.

No, I told her, Illinois law says mothers can breastfeed in any public or private location they are authorized to be.

*Sun-Times columnist Natalie Y. Moore is a reporter for WBEZ and author of “The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation.”*

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