

Breastfeeding is not 'easy' – stop telling new mothers that it is

June 19 2018, by Amy Brown



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It's difficult to talk about breastfeeding in a productive way right now.

On the one hand, the UK's breastfeeding rates are so low, that campaigns such as [National Breastfeeding week](#) have become really important in encouraging more people to support it. Unfortunately, at the same time, these events often stir up a lot of hurt, by reminding many women why we have such low rates in the first place. Whether they are breastfeeding, struggling to, or find they can't, far too many women experience a lack of support in feeding their baby.

One of the traps public health promotion can fall into is being so keen to promote breastfeeding that any challenges get glossed over, through fear that it'll put women off. Instead breastfeeding gets painted as some kind of idyllic, simple, miracle cure for all ills. Of course, many women hugely value breastfeeding, but any approach that takes this stance is doing both women and breastfeeding a huge injustice.

Breastfeeding is not easy. It requires women's time and investment and can be a steep learning curve. However, that's in no way to say the alternative is any easier. Many women find once they get through the early weeks of breastfeeding they actually find it much easier than bottle feeding.

But that still doesn't make it easy. And that's OK.

Ignoring the truth

What in life worth doing is easy? We put ourselves through challenges all the time. We work hard for exams. We train for races. We do it because we think it's worth it, not because it's easy. And we expect others to support us. Imagine our outrage if we were training for a race and everyone suggested it wasn't worth it.

Calling breastfeeding easy is an injustice to the [investment women make when they breastfeed](#). They may want to breastfeed, enjoy it, believe it

is worth it – but that doesn't make it easy. Easy belittles the many hundreds of hours women will spend breastfeeding, the challenges they may have to overcome, the sacrifices they may make because they decide it's worth it.

By thinking we need to call breastfeeding easy to persuade women to do it, we ignore their strength and resilience. In her groundbreaking book [The Big Letdown](#), journalist Kimberly Seals Allers talks about how the pain and difficulty of breastfeeding is often skirted around, yet we admire women's tattoos, or consider the pain of waxing to be completely normal.

For a [2016 study](#) I asked more than 1,000 mothers how they wanted breastfeeding promotion messages to change. One of the key messages to come out of the study was a call for more realistic messages. As one woman appealed: "Give us honest real information about how hard it can be to latch on, information about growth spurts, how often babies feed, so mums can make informed decisions on feeding."

When we gloss over the realities of breastfeeding, women feel unprepared for what it's really like. If we tell women to expect easy, and they hit a hurdle, they may think they're doing something wrong. [Normal \(but not easy to handle\) baby behaviour](#) such as frequent feeding, not wanting to be put down, or night waking, gets perceived as something has gone wrong, and that formula will solve it ([it won't](#)). Women then end up [depressed](#), blaming themselves, thinking they didn't try hard enough because after all, isn't breastfeeding easy? "It was all so positive. Breastfeeding will help you lose weight. Breastfeeding will make bonding easier. Breastfeeding is a wonderful experience. Perhaps true but when I then found it difficult I felt like a complete failure and embarrassed and guilty that I felt that way to boot. If I'd known the truth I could have worked through all of this rather than thinking it wrong."

Ease over easy

Rather than calling breastfeeding easy, we need to think about how we as a society can make breastfeeding easier for mothers. In some cultures, the [community comes around the new mother](#), mothering and supporting her while she recovers from childbirth and gets to grips with [breastfeeding](#). Instead, in many Western countries, our solution to any challenge is often to [offer to feed the baby](#). But the best way of caring for a breastfed baby is to care for their mother. Feed her, love her, support her by taking care of other stuff. Do housework, run errands, look after older children. The same goes for supporting women who are bottle feeding – don't take the easy option of offering to feed the baby.

Alongside this the [government must step up](#) and make things easier for all new families. Better investment in the NHS is needed, so that [women](#) have [greater support](#) – however they feed their baby. Access to expert [mental health services](#) for all new parents needs to be widened too, to debrief birth, feeding and early parenting experiences. In addition, longer, better paid leave for both mothers and fathers, as per [the Swedish model](#), would do wonders for the well-being of the whole family.

Rather than sugar coating early motherhood as easy, we need to step up, tell the truth and actually support our new families.

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