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*This is one of the first essays I wrote at St. Edward’s: a research paper on any controversial science or health topic for my Rhetoric and Composition II class. I chose to write about breastfeeding, and argued for why people and corporations should be more accepting of it. This is an example of a research paper I did based on a health topic.*

The Benefits of Breastfeeding

“O, thou beautiful damsel, may the four oceans

Of the earth contribute the secretion of milk

In thy breasts for the purpose for improving

The bodily strength of the child

O, thou with the beautiful face, may the child

Reared on your milk, attain a long life, like

The gods made immortal with drinks of nectar”

--Sushruta, ancient Indian surgeon (translated)

I: INTRODUCTION

How a child is reared is critical towards shaping them as a person for the rest of their life. This starts at a very early age, even while still in development in the womb. Even though people may not have memories of their infancy, how parents or guardians raise their baby has a significant effect on that child’s entire life. The main biological purpose of childhood is growth. Growth is achieved through hormones and these are able to function from energy gained from food and its nutrients. In the beginning stages of life, a human is not able to consume any foods besides that of its mother’s breast milk, or imitation thereof. This is because it does not have the teeth to chew or bite solid foods, as well as the inability to digest certain foods. Therefore, the baby relies on the mother’s milk as its sole source of nutrition and calories until it is able to consume more sophisticated foods. This is not to say that the mother’s milk is an unrefined substance. In fact, it has been found to have the perfect combination of proteins (whey, casein, lactoerrin, secretory IgA, lysozyme, bifidius factor), fats, vitamins (A, C, D, E, K, riboflavin, niacin, panthothenic acid), and carbohydrates (lactose). It is also easily digestible for babies. Additionally, breast milk contains leukocytes, which are living cells that fight infection and are only found in breast milk, unable to be replicated for formula purposes.

The act of breastfeeding, and providing a baby with breast milk, offers many perks for both the mother and child. This can be seen through developmental and health advantages intellectually, psychologically, and physically for the baby who consumes the milk. As for the mother, health benefits can also be derived from lactating and nursing the child. In addition to the health perks, it is also more economical to use naturally made milk from the mother. Finally, it is seen by people across many cultures that breastfeeding is a natural process and is associated with certain traditions and sacredness.

Breastfeeding, however, despite its many benefits, has been under controversy in modern society. Some people believe that using formulas is just as viable as natural breast milk. There is also the dispute over whether it is socially acceptable or not to breastfeed in public. However, it has been found through many studies that breastfeeding is the best option for both mother and baby and cannot be matched by formula.

II: BENEFITS FOR CHILD

“A newborn baby has only three demands. They are warmth in the arms of its mother, food from her breasts, and security in the knowledge of her presence. Breastfeeding satisfies all three.”

--Grantly Dick-Read, British obstetrician

When a child is born, it is very fragile and its entire life depends on the nurture of its mother. By choosing to breastfeed her baby, a mother can ensure an array of benefits that her child will receive that simply are not attainable through formula. These advantages are provided in overall improved health, growth, and development—both physically and psychologically. The effects of breastfeeding and breast milk last not only while the baby is nursing and developing through infancy, but also result in a lifetime of benefits.

 It is a commonly known fact that children who were breastfed tend to be more intelligent than those of their peers who grew up consuming formula out of a bottle. In a longitudinal study done in Belarus, (the largest lactation study ever conducted to date), 13,889 infants born between June of 1996 and December of 1997 were followed for 6.5 years. The results reveal that the babies who were breastfed had IQs that were significantly higher than those fed formula, averaging 2.9-7.5 points higher (Kramer, et al.).  The massive sample size makes this study overtly important and its results to be compelling evidence, to almost the point of being factual. In a cross-sectional study done by scientists at Brown University, adolescents were tested for their amounts of white matter, which is basically the number of neural connections in the brain. It was found that those who were breastfed had an increased white matter content in the frontal and association brain regions as much as 34% greater over the adolescents who were fed formula (Deoni, et al.). This study shows how the effects of breastfeeding last into adolescence, many years after being cut off of breast milk. These two studies make it clear that by breastfeeding her baby, a mother assures her baby to be of higher intelligence than his or her bottle-fed peers.

Besides creating smarter children, breastfeeding also makes healthier children. In an extensive study done by the World Health Organization, (a specialized agency of the United Nations, concerned with international public health), many positive benefits were found in the long-term effects of breastfeeding, including lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, lower overweight/obesity rates, and a lower risk of type-2 diabetes (Horta, et al.). Other studies have been done that look at each of these health concerns individually, however none to the extent of WHO. Other benefits that this study alludes to that were found in previous studies include decreased risk of sudden infant death syndrome, prevention or delay of allergic diseases (atopy), decreased risk of necrotizing enterocolitis, lower risk of asthma, and a better chance of good dental health. It is also stated that breast milk is also thought of as having a possible protective effect against insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, Crohn’s diseases, ulcerative colitis, lymphoma, and digestive diseases. Some of these factors also contribute towards other health benefits. For example, the prevalence of lower blood pressure amongst breastfed individuals could then also lower their risk of hypertension, coronary heart disease, and strokes. Undoubtedly, any mother would want their child to be as in good health as possible, so it seems like an obvious choice for them to breastfeed their baby with the milk that they naturally lactate as a result of pregnancy.

Not only is the baby’s physical health and intelligence increased by breastfeeding, but their mental health is too. As previously explained, the child’s intelligence is significantly improved by being breastfed, as multiple studies have proven. It betters overall cognitive development because of both the unique composition of human breast milk and the physical nature of nursing. According to a study done by researchers at Curtin University of Technology in Australia, breastfeeding for 6 months or longer is an independent predictor of better mental health through childhood and adolescence. The longer the infant was breastfed, the less likely they were to suffer from depression, delinquent behavior, attention issues, and other psychological problems (Oddy, et al.). These children are also found to be less anxious and able to handle stress better later in life.  While not all mothers are able to breastfeed, if they can it seems like the unquestionable option to do so, as it benefits their baby from their first days out of the womb into the rest of their life.

III: BENEFITS FOR MOTHER

“It is only in the act of nursing that a woman realizes her motherhood in visible and tangible fashion; it is a joy of every moment.”

 --Honoré de Balzac, French novelist

In addition to providing ameliorations for the child, the act of breastfeeding is also beneficial for the mother. While the mother cannot gain from the nutrients of the breast milk herself as her baby does, by choosing breastfeeding over formula, it is favorable to her in numerous ways. By embracing breastfeeding, a mother creates a strong emotional and psychological bond with her baby. Additionally, mothers who decided to breastfeed their children are proven to prosper from a wide variety of health benefits. Along with these direct attainments for the mother, there is also great financial savings from choosing to breastfeed.

It is often thought that there is no stronger bond than that between a mother and her nursing child. This physical adhesion is a quite literal metaphor for the significant emotional and psychological attachment created between the infant and mother. This is because the hormones that a mother releases while nursing (oxytocin and prolactin) relax the mom and make her feel more nurturing towards her baby. It can also help enable sleep where a mother may otherwise have difficulty sleeping (Chua). There is also evidence that skin-to-skin contact between the mother and baby (a phenomenon known as “kangaroo care”) stimulates the baby to begin breastfeeding. Newborns who are instantly placed on their mother’s skin have a natural instinct to latch onto the breast and begin nursing, on average, within only an hour of birth. It is reported that this immediate skin-to-skin contact provides a form of imprinting that makes feeding thereafter significantly easier, in addition to reduced crying (Cornall). This intimate contact makes the newborns feel safe, warm, and comforted, and gives the mother quiet time to bond with her child. Furthermore, spousal support for the mother while breastfeeding can promote familial bonds and contribute towards a paternal bond between father and child.

While the maternal-infant bond may be the most eminent benefit of breastfeeding for the mother, there are actually also many health advantages for her too. It has been proven that women who suckle their children are at a lower risk for contracting postpartum bleeding, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer, coronary heart disease, osteoporosis, metabolic syndrome, type 2 Diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, cardiovascular disease, and postpartum depression (NICHD). Weight loss due to lactation is a well-recognized short-term benefit of nursing. During pregnancy, a woman’s body goes through gestational weight gain, which is where, in anticipation of lactation, her body stores fat in the abdomen, thighs, arms, buttocks, and breasts. After birth, the stored fats are primed to be metabolized through lactation. It has been found through numerous studies that breastfeeding is associated with greater postpartum weight loss than women who formula feed their babies, as the infant is tapping into the milk that this stored fat is then mobilized to create. In a study done at the University of California, Davis, scientists monitored the weight of breastfeeding and formula feeding mothers for 18 months, and found that women who breastfed during the first year postpartum lost an average of 2kg more than their formula feeding counterparts. This may not seem like much, however it must also be taken into consideration that lactating women must consume more calories, as nursing requires a lot of energy. It was concluded that lactation enhances weight loss postpartum if the nursing continues for at least 6 months (Dewey). Women who choose to feed their children formula instead of breastfeeding them are putting themselves at a loss of improving their health.

Although not as directly related to the mother’s well-being as the previous examples, by breastfeeding their infant, a family is able to save a significant amount of money. Firstly, because of the health benefits as previously mentioned for both mother and child, there would be a considerably lower incidence of illness, therefore, less parental absences from work (and lost income) and fewer insurance claims and medical bills. Secondly, the cost of formula is anywhere between $1,160 and $3,915 a year, depending on the brand, in addition to the costs for the bottles and other equipment (NICHD). It also is more environmentally friendly to breastfeed as it does not create the trash from used bottles and formulas. By providing naturally occurring milk for her child a mother is not only utilizing something absolutely free, but also supplying a far superior source of nutrition for her infant. Additionally, she is also fostering herself through the health benefits she gains and bonding she creates with her baby.

IV: COUNTER-ARGUMENT AND CONTROVERSY

“When we trust the makers of baby formula more than we do our own ability to nourish our babies, we lose a chance to claim an aspect of our power as women. Thinking that baby formula is as good as breast milk is believing that thirty years of technology is superior to three million years of nature's evolution. Countless women have regained trust in their bodies through nursing their children, even if they weren't sure at first that they could do it. It is an act of female power, and I think of it as feminism in its purest form.”

 --Christiane Northrup, M.D., American obstetrician and author

Many women in modern society choose to feed their babies infant formula instead of breastfeeding them with the milk they naturally produce for an array of reasons. While some women cannot or should not nurse for health reasons (HIV and drugs/toxins can potentially be transmitted via breast milk), others choose not to for more personal reasons. Two commonly cited reasons for this are because of the social stigma of publicly feeding and because of work obligations. These women then have resolve to using alternative methods of feeding their babies.

Infant formula is the most commonly used alternative to breastfeeding in baby nutrition. Although it has only been around since the early 1900’s, and even then it was not anything like what is currently on the market, society still seems to find this as what is acceptable over a natural act that has occurred for as long as human existence. Even with all the improvements made over the years, formula cannot provide certain nutrients that are only found in human breast milk and are unable to be duplicated. Formula can also be contaminated, and requires bottles, mixing, and heating up, whereas a breast is always readily available (Stuebe). Other alternatives to formula include wet nursing, which is the act of having another lactating woman nurse one’s child, but is now obsolete and rarely practiced. And expressing, which is where a woman uses a breast pump to artificially remove and store her milk for later usage. While expressed milk still has the same nutrients of breast milk (although some research suggests that the antioxidant activity decreases), it fails to provide the essential bonding between mother and infant that the physical breastfeeding can suffice.

Unfortunately, in the United States there is a social stigma that breastfeeding in public is gross or is even seen as sexual objectification. For this reason, many women feel pressured to bottle-feed their child while in public settings. While laws vary from state to state, all states have passed legislation that either explicitly allows women to breastfeed in public, or exempts them from prosecution for public indecency or indecent exposure for doing so (Maternal and Child Health Bureau). Despite this, many women still feel uncomfortable feeding in public, as it is not uncommon for them to receive looks of disgust, and for this reason some mothers will never even initiate breastfeeding at all. There is also the negative perception of public breastfeeding because of western society’s oversexualization of breasts, forgetting their biological purposes and leaving women embarrassed to socially nurse, and oftentimes ending up switching to using a bottle. People are too concerned with what others are doing, and shame the woman for being “nude” in public and flagrantly displaying her anatomy for all to see, when in reality her purpose is to nourish her child and not create a scene.

Some mothers choose not to breastfeed because of their work schedule, where they wouldn’t have the time to be with their child and nurse them. One out of three women will return to go to work within three months of giving birth, and two out of three women will return to work within 6 months of giving birth. Depending on the job, many mothers will return within six weeks or less of giving birth. Maternity leave in the United States varies widely despite the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which provides most working mothers up to twelve weeks. However, many mothers are forced to take unpaid time off from their job and the majority do not use FMLA for the full twelve weeks (Galson). The result of this is a decrease in women breastfeeding for the recommended minimum of one year, and an overall decrease in women choosing to breastfeed. 71% of American mothers initiate breastfeed, however only 35% manage to prevail for at least six months (Godfrey). There is hope though, as of recently, because many employers have discovered that accommodating employees who breastfeed is good business. The Office on Women’s Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services notes that the health benefits to mother and baby conveyed by breastfeeding translate into reduced costs to employers due to lower health care costs, decreased absenteeism, enhanced productivity, improved employee satisfaction, and a better corporate image (Galson). Breastfeeding in the workplace is a feasible option if a time and location are set up for which the employee may express breast milk, or if a child care service is on-site or nearby. Clearly, breastfeeding is the unmatched by its alternative solutions in providing the best nutrition and health for both mother and baby, so all women than can breastfeed should, despite societal stigmas.

V: CONCLUSION

“A woman's life isn't worth a plateful of cabbage if she hasn't felt life stir under her heart. Taking a little one to nurse, watching him grow to manhood, that's what love is.”

--Carol Shields, Canadian author

The decision to breastfeed is the best gift that a mother can give to both her child and to herself. Not only is she ensuring her child a lifetime of health advantages both psychologically and physically, but also a greater intelligence. For herself she is also gaining good health and is creating a private bond with her infant. By choosing to nurse her baby naturally a woman is also saving money, and serving aid to society by being environmentally “green” and by also helping the economy because of the fewer absences and better work performance she’d have. While society on the other hand may still not be favorable towards women breastfeeding, if most people knew all the benefits of choosing to nurse over bottle-feeding formula, they would probably change their views. If a woman is able to breastfeed, there is no reason she should not do so, because above all the health, financial, and societal benefits, the intimate relationship that she has in that quiet window of time while her baby drinks from her breasts is unmatched to anything else in the world.

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