

Mother's milk

[News and Features](#) By [Marcus Griffith](#)



Mai Isham nurses her baby, Sanaa. / Photo by Anni Becker

Breastfeeding families face several challenges in our culture,” said Melissa Cole, a Board Certified Lactation Consultant. Cole operates Vancouver’s Luna Lactation, a private practice that provides “comprehensive breastfeeding support to families,” according to its website. “The first challenge is the fact that we lost our breastfeeding culture for many generations so girls and women have not grown up around many breastfeeding role models.”

The difficulty facing breastfeeding mothers starts immediately after delivery. “Following birth, lack of quality lactation support and follow-up sadly lets many moms experiencing breastfeeding issues fall through the cracks,” Cole explained. Additionally, “the lack of critical breastfeeding education and the marketing of artificial infant milk (aka formula) also is a setback for many breastfeeding families.”

Public resistance to breast feeding can also hinder successful breastfeeding. “Society is more comfortable using breasts to sell beer rather than to feed babies,” Cole stated.

Despite the challenges, Nancy Agnew, a local research consultant, is finding breastfeeding her five-month-old daughter, Abigail, to be more rewarding than she first anticipated. “I love the

closeness when I nurse her,” she beamed. “It’s such a great feeling. I love knowing milk from my body is helping her grow strong.”

Agnew’s greatest challenge in breastfeeding was her unsuccessful attempt to express milk when she returned to work after two months of maternity leave. “I tried to pump, but I just couldn’t do it. I felt demeaned, like a cow being hooked up to a milking machine. And the whole time, I kept thinking that my breasts were designed for Abigail, not this heartless machine.”

“It was pretty obvious that I couldn’t work away from home and still breastfeed,” Agnew said, “but I dreaded the idea of switching over to formula feeding.” Agnew discussed her situation with both her husband, Gregory, and her boss, and was able to create a viable solution.

“I was really lucky; we were able to work things out,” Agnew stated. She switched to a part-time position that let her work at home and gave her more time for child care. “It was a double benefit. I could spend more time with Abigail and keep nursing her.”

Agnew and her husband also made financial decisions to meet the budget gap from the reduced hours. “The first thing to go was cable and the second car,” Agnew stated. Her husband now carpools and rides the bus to work, changes he readily made. “It was nice having my own car, but figuring out a way to let Nancy continue nursing is best for Abigail.”

Kristen Rydberg is in the home stretch of her third trimester and looking forward to breastfeeding her soon-to-be-born daughter. “My plan is to nurse my baby until she is between 9 months and a 1 year,” she said in an email. To help prepare for the challenges of breastfeeding, Rydberg will start meeting with a lactation counselor later this month.

For Rydberg, the changes to her body during the pregnancy have had significant impact on her. “I know it’s all for the good of the baby. It’s hard as a young woman to just let it happen and be okay with it,” she said.

Rydberg hopes things “will go back to normal” after her baby is born. Rydberg also appreciates the support of her husband, Lee, during the pregnancy and is looking forward to his continued support when she starts breastfeeding.

Global efforts to increase breastfeeding success

World Breastfeeding Week is held August 1st-7th every year. The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) hosts the international event to increase cultural acceptance of breastfeeding and the success of breastfeeding mothers worldwide. The 19-year-old event involves over 120 countries and is endorsed by UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Exactly why breastfeeding needs help to be considered normative behavior is puzzling to many, including Alfonsa Diouf, a WABA spokesperson. “Viewing breastfeeding as abnormal doesn’t make sense to me,” Diouf stated in a phone interview. “Breast milk is the best nutrition for a baby and breastfeeding develops strong mother-child bonds essential to healthy children. Why would anyone want to marginalize that?”

Diouf's thoughts are echoed by Loretta McCallister, spokeswoman for La Leche League International. "Breastfeeding is not strange, it's not new, it's what nature intended," McCallister said in a phone interview.

McCallister explained that support from family, friends and employers is crucial in helping a nursing mother succeed. "It's important for mothers to breastfeed early and often to establish and maintain supply," she stated. "A newborn needs to nurse every one-and-a-half to two hours. Without support, it can be difficult for a mother to meet the needs of her child."

Breastfeeding and the law

Washington State law excludes breastfeeding from indecent exposure charges and offers anti-discrimination protection to breastfeeding mothers. RCW 9A.88.010 unambiguously states: "The act of breastfeeding or expressing breast milk is not indecent exposure." Similar protections are offered in Oregon.

In an email response to a media inquiry, Kevin McClure, Vancouver City Prosecutor said, "The City prosecutes Indecent Exposure under the Revised Code of Washington. . . . Breastfeeding is not prosecutable as indecent exposure under Washington law." It is irrelevant if a mother breastfeeds publicly or if any, or all, of the breast is visible; the act is simply not indecent under the law according to the City of Vancouver.

RCW 49.60.215, commonly referred to as the anti-discrimination law, lists "status as a mother breastfeeding her child" as a protected class. Additionally, RCW 49.60.30 specifically recognizes "[t]he right of a mother to breastfeed her child in any place of public resort, accommodation, assemblage, or amusement" as a civil right. Currently, Oregon does not provide civil right status to breastfeeding mothers.

Marcus Griffith is a veteran, bike enthusiast and freelance reporter for The Voice.

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