

The Quiet Underground Is Quiet No More

Extended Breastfeeding Is Officially Out of the Closet

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Editorial

My first reaction to the now-infamous *Time* magazine cover was to groan out loud. Like many of you, I was horrified by that cover's mean-spirited tone. If we didn't get the message from the picture, there was also the antagonistic caption: Are you mom enough? It wasn't until later that I recognized that this cover, and the controversy that followed, actually reflected a positive shift. Many things had changed since I first became aware of this topic more than 20 years ago.



In 1992, I was just finishing my post-doctoral fellowship at the University of New Hampshire and was expecting my second baby. My first experience had gone not particularly well, so I spent months educating myself about birth, breastfeeding, and postpartum. During this time, I became friends with Dr. Muriel Sugarman. We were both on the board of a local child abuse organization in Massachusetts. Muriel was a child psychiatrist at Harvard's Massachusetts General Hospital and an amazing ally to the breastfeeding community. She was interested in long-term breastfeeding and had collected some data. ("Long-term" was operationally defined for that study as "six months or longer.") We started working on it together, and bit by bit, had some findings to report.

We submitted one of our first articles on weaning ages to [a well-known journal in pediatrics]. Consistent with studies in other parts of the world, when weaning was child led, it tended to occur at ages 2.5 to 3. So far, so good.

But then there were our outliers...the babies who weaned at age 5...and a couple of babies were even older. The reviewers, all women we later learned, went completely nuts. If it had been up to them, we would have been both rejected...and flogged. (Eighteen years later, these are still the worst reviews I've ever received.) They hated us, our study, and mostly definitely our "weird" mothers.

I wasn't sure what to do next, until a colleague handed me an article called, "Darwin takes on mainstream medicine." It described how extended breastfeeding, babywearing, and cosleeping conferred a survival advantage for moms and babies, and was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meetings. That was radical stuff in the mid-1990s. I sacked our introduction and rewrote it using this framework.

The next question was where to send the revised manuscript. I called a pediatric researcher I knew in Philadelphia. He said, "Oh, I never send articles to [well-known pediatric journal]. They're mean!" That had certainly been my experience. He recommended *Clinical Pediatrics*, where we got a much more positive reception. The article came out. We were happy. End of story....or so we thought.

In 1997, AAP Statement on Breastfeeding was released. Controversy swirled around that statement for months about one bit in particular: that women breastfeed for at least 12 months and "as long thereafter as is mutually desired." I was going about my business, blithely unaware that Muriel and I were smack in the middle of the controversy. What reference did the AAP cite to support "as long thereafter as is mutually desired"? You've got it: Sugarman and Kendall-Tackett (1995)!

That paper taught me a lot. Ten years later, when I applied for APA Fellow, I identified it as one of the most important in my career. I learned firsthand about the intense negative stigma surrounding extended breastfeeding. I was equally amazed to discover a quiet underground of women who were defying cultural

norms and nursing their older babies right under the radar of family, friends, and healthcare providers. Avery described this phenomenon as “closet nursing,” and noted that extended breastfeeding had a lot in common with revealing sexual orientation. Brave souls who chose to be up front faced marginalization—or worse.

Through much of the decade that followed publication of our article, Muriel and I, along with Liz Baldwin and Kathy Dettwyler, frequently had to write letters to courts and child protection agencies on behalf of mothers who were being investigated for child abuse. Their crime? Extended breastfeeding.

Which brings us up to the present time. Yes, the *Time* magazine article said mean things. But look at it this way: extended breastfeeding is being discussed in a mainstream publication. In addition, thanks to social media, the “quiet underground” is quiet no more. I’ve been amazed at the outpouring of support from both celebrities—and ordinary moms—speaking openly and positively about extended breastfeeding. It was something I couldn’t even imagine in 1995. I think it’s safe to say that extended breastfeeding is officially out of the closet.

In closing, I’d like to suggest that we all owe a debt of gratitude to Drs. Ruth Lawrence and Larry Gartner, and the other brave members of the 1997 AAP Committee on Breastfeeding. Their statement did much to move extended breastfeeding out of the margins and into the public square (and Muriel and I were happy to have a small part in that). We still have a ways to go. But let’s take a moment and savor this small victory.

And to the members of the 1997 AAP Committee, I say this: We, the quiet underground, salute you!

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