

Conference: The Meaning of Motherhood

AUT Tech Park, Penrose, Auckland

Friday 28 November 2008

Becoming Through Breastfeeding Breastfeeding and Maternal Identity

Presenter: Barbara Sturmfels, La Leche League Leader

Notes in conference programme:

Much has been said – and indeed best practice is now based on – mother’s milk as the best start in life for baby. What is much less explored is the relational side of breastfeeding and the potentially transformative impact on maternal identity. This workshop will investigate how breastfeeding helps a woman form an identity as mother, influences her relationship with her child, affects a woman’s sense of her body and her feelings of worth, and how breastfeeding can also create a transformation towards healing. By discussing how breastfeeding is experienced and perceived from the woman’s perspective, this workshop will elucidate how the process of becoming a mother is deeply linked to the act of breastfeeding.

40 mins, 1.15 – 1.55pm

Presentation Notes :

This session explores what it is about breastfeeding (or not) that is meaningful for mothers, by sharing a selection of mothers’ stories and inviting those present to share their own thoughts.

Every mother has a different story to tell.....

She may have a different story to tell in hindsight than she did in foresight:

- Why did she want to breastfeed her baby = what were the triggers?
- What does she feel about having breastfed or not = her reflections?
- How does she feel about breastfeeding if she didn’t breastfeed?

Breastfeeding is usually promoted as important for the baby, or for the mother-baby relationship. But is the experience of breastfeeding also important just for the mother, in her own right as a human being?

Opening Round: Introduce yourselves and briefly share why you chose this session.

Quote from Viola Lennon (Mother of 10; one of the seven Founders of La Leche League International) reflecting on her breastfeeding experience:

“I feel that breastfeeding gives the mother a vision of what a human person is. Personally, it led me to self-discovery and to a greater appreciation of the full humanity of the babies who were entrusted to me.”

Lisa’s Story, as told in LLLNZ’s magazine *Aroha*:

Lisa experienced a multitude of problems in the early weeks after birth.

“By the time Jana was seven-and-a-half weeks old, I was no longer able to endure the physical pain and the mental torture which preceded Jana latching on to the breast. I succumbed to bottle feeding, but felt a huge sense of loss and was intensely jealous when my husband fed Jana. Three weeks later, I could not bear the grief and sense of failure and shame - society expects mothers to breastfeed “this age” infant, but then decides when it is inappropriate to feed “that age” infant. ... Then began my struggle to relactate. ... Two months later... the formula had been reduced to 100mls per day, given in a cup. To me this seemed a small compromise after having had a fully bottle-feeding baby. ... The effort has been undeniably worth it... Breastfeeding is a special gift I can give her that no-one else can. When I watch her nurse and feel her hands touch my skin, when her eyes look into mine and her mouth leaves the breast to turn into a smile, I know that this experience cannot be matched by bottle-feeding, no matter what anyone says.”

Of her husband Mike, Lisa says:

”[he] has put up with my dramatic mood swings, waited on me hand and foot, believed in the importance of breastfeeding, and kept on loving me.”

Mike comments:

“My wife Lisa has shown the greatest courage and determination in her goal to breastfeed Jana. She persevered for reasons that I couldn’t quite understand. I was only able to listen to her and assist wherever possible. I now have a greater admiration for all the mothers in the world.”

Lisa perceived breastfeeding as very important to her identity as a mother, possibly even important for the maintenance of her mental health.

The more a mother links breastfeeding with maternal identity, the more she will persevere to overcome breastfeeding challenges. Also, the more she may be inclined to go against societal prescriptions to wean early.

But she can’t do it on her own – would Lisa have managed without support? - as so many mothers in earlier generations have found:

Conversation with a stranger

This is the story of a woman aged in her 60’s whom I met while waiting at the hairdresser when I was the new mother of a six month old daughter. We got chatting while my baby and I breastfed. She asked me what it felt like to breastfeed my baby. And then she started crying and talked about how she wanted to breastfeed her babies but couldn’t. She talked about the sense of loss, and at

feeling totally restrained from expressing that loss at the time or since, how sad she felt and how inhibited from expressing it. And then she told me that she had never told this to anyone before, that she had kept it to herself all these years (decades). She was clearly surprised and overwhelmed by the strength of her feelings – loss, grief, anger, bewilderment.

What a profound sense of loss. This mother knew that she had been denied something very important to her as a mother, and she sensed too that there was something missing in her relationship with her children. She didn't feel that she was a 'bad' mother, not at all, and she was close to her children – but she had a sense that there could have been more. She described how she felt this even more when she became a grandmother and her grandchildren were breastfed..... but she still didn't talk to anyone about it, including (or maybe especially) her own children.

Healing

This conversation stuck in my mind. A few years later, I wrote about my experience of breastfeeding my daughter and the long gradual process of weaning. As I did so, I thought of this woman and also of my relationship with my own mother whose breastfeeding had followed a similarly regrettable path (ie derailed before it had even begun), as so many women's did in those days. It seemed to me that by breastfeeding my daughter and taking our time about weaning, both she and I had gained enormously and in so many ways – far more than we would ever be able to comprehend we had missed had we not had the experience. Was there an element, for me, of not just filling my daughter's cup to the brim but also of filling up my own that had only been partly filled because of what I and my mother had missed out on when I was a baby? I think there might have been.

Mothers Talking

I recently had a group conversation with five friends who have children around the same age as mine (teenagers). We hadn't previously discussed breastfeeding or mothering in great depth although we saw each other regularly and knew each other fairly well. (These were women I knew outside my life as a La Leche League Leader.) Let me share some of their reflections:

"I loved the physical contact with my babies. You have to have it with breastfeeding, and I loved it."

"Breastfeeding made me feel important, essential, valued"

"It was meant to be. It's part of motherhood, like giving birth. It's what you do."

"It's very intimate, primal, instinctive."

"I was more in touch with myself when I was breastfeeding; more aware of my own physical needs, for example for food"

On special needs:

"My baby was jaundiced and all the advice in hospital was to put him on a bottle. But breastfeeding was really really important. I just knew it was important. I don't know why"

I didn't do what they told me, but I'm glad I didn't because they were wrong weren't they? I just knew it was ridiculous to have all this milk and not use it."

"My baby was prem and needed a lot of medical care. I had to go home from hospital without him and just visit. Each time I left him, it felt like a death. It was so important to me that that part of motherhood [breastfeeding] could still happen."

"When my friend was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was more distraught at the thought of needing to wean than at having cancer."

On becoming a mother (you can't talk about breastfeeding for long before the conversation turns to mothering generally):

"It took me a year with my first to feel comfortable about not tearing around being busy."

"It was lovely just to sit and do nothing. The world reduces to a small space when you have babies. It changes what matters."

Discussion questions:

(discuss in pairs, then share with larger group if you wish)

How important is breastfeeding to your identity as a mother?

Does it matter what breastfeeding means to the mother? How, and why, does it matter?

Closing:

Invite attendees to reflect on:

A theme that emerged from the session,

Or:

Something that you will remember from the session.