



Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy

Courtney Jung

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy

Courtney Jung

Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy Courtney Jung

Social scientist and mother Courtney Jung explores the ever-expanding world of breastfeeding advocacy, shining a new light on the diverse communities who compose it, the dubious science behind it, and the pernicious public policies to which it has given rise

Is breast really best? Breastfeeding is widely assumed to be the healthiest choice, yet growing evidence suggests that its benefits have been greatly exaggerated. New moms are pressured by doctors, health officials, and friends to avoid the bottle at all costs—often at the expense of their jobs, their pocketbooks, and their well-being.

In *Lactivism*, political scientist Courtney Jung offers the most deeply researched and far-reaching critique of breastfeeding advocacy to date. Drawing on her own experience as a devoted mother who breastfed her two children and her expertise as a social scientist, Jung investigates the benefits of breastfeeding and asks why so many people across the political spectrum are passionately invested in promoting it, even as its health benefits have been persuasively challenged. What emerges is an eye-opening story about class and race in America, the big business of breastfeeding, and the fraught politics of contemporary motherhood.

Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy Details

Date : Published November 24th 2015 by Basic Books (first published September 8th 2015)

ISBN : 9780465039692

Author : Courtney Jung

Format : Hardcover 272 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Parenting, Feminism, Politics

 [Download Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies a ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy Courtney Jung

From Reader Review Lactivism: How Feminists and Fundamentalists, Hippies and Yuppies, and Physicians and Politicians Made Breastfeeding Big Business and Bad Policy for online ebook

Laura says

First of all, the author breastfed her children for about two years each so she is NOT against breastfeeding. What she is against is the current atmosphere where women feel no choice on whether to breastfeed, but instead breastfeeding seems to be forced on all new mothers. Breastfeeding has been pushed so heavily because the current thought is that "breast is best." However, through her detailed analysis of many studies, most importantly the PROBIT study, Jung proves that this is not necessarily the case. Breastfeeding provides only a very mild reduction in ear and GI infections, but really even those are almost insignificant (for every 26 exclusively breastfed baby, one of them will avoid a respiratory infection that would have gotten if they hadn't been exclusively breastfed). There are no conclusive studies (yes, there are studies that contradict Jung but those are observational, not randomized, studies that have many flaws including small study subjects, faulty memories, and questionable correlations) to indicate that breastfeeding lowers a child's risk of eczema, allergies, asthma, SIDS, cancer, type 2 diabetes, or higher intelligence (there are studies which actually indicate bottle fed babies have higher intelligence). Not even obesity is able to be linked to bottle fed babies; the strongest indicator for childhood obesity is the mother's weight.

Jung interviews many pediatricians, researchers, and policy administrators including those involved in Latch on NYC, a PR campaign in NYC which, in an almost Nazi-like way, pushed breastfeeding upon mothers. Shockingly, NY hospitals began to lock away formula with prescriptive drugs so that only the RN could retrieve it and physician orders were needed indicating it was medically indicated. Shockingly, WIC mothers who do not breastfeed their child get less assistance for a shorter time.

Jung rightly argues that it is no longer about the "bond" that is supposed to happen when mom nurses her baby, it is only about the commodity of breast milk -breast milk has become a product (when La Leche League started in the 1950s its mission was to encourage the bonding). This leads into discussion of the money behind breast milk and perhaps why it is being pushed. Medela sponsors "breast is best" symposiums. And breast milk, which is unregulated, is now sold online with no screening. Breast pump companies have been funders of many breast milk studies. The US alone accounts for 40% of all pump sales. Jung points out that NO woman likes to pump and relates how horrible it is to have that thing hooked up to you (been there, done that), but it is often the guilt from society that pushes women to continue to breastfeed when it is no longer convenient. Mothers have to find closets and bathrooms to pump and squeeze breaks into already hectic days. I recently met a teacher who is determined to pump until her child's first birthday. Her planning period is consumed by pumping, she pumps right before leaving school for the day, she pumps while grading papers at night. She is exhausted, but the guilt keeps her going.

Finally, Jung argues that what we need to do to support mothers who actually do want to breastfeed (because remember this is all about a choice!) and to have PAID maternity leaves AND longer maternity leaves. If policy makers want to push breastfeeding why are they not working on maternity leave!?

Jung's argument is so strong and her evidence so clear. This is an important women's issue that is often overlooked. SO much for which women must fight for these days is about the choice of what to do with their bodies. Breastfeeding has no longer become a personal choice. It has become a way to make new mothers feel guilty. Jung proves that no one is harming their child by choosing not to nurse as many people accuse them of. In the end Jung says she would still have nursed her children because THAT IS WHAT SHE

WANTED TO DO. It was her personal choice. I had three children and I nursed them each for six weeks exactly. I don't feel a need to explain to anyone why I chose to nurse for eight weeks, not eight months. I pumped towards the end and it was just a horrible thing. I never had any issues with nursing and I am sure, had I wanted to, I could have nursed for two years. So for me, it was not medically necessary to stop. It was my personal choice. I wish other mothers would feel the same way. ONLY YOU, the mother, should make a decision.

Melissa Rochelle says

The ultimate point of this book is to look at how breastfeeding (especially pumping) is now used politically - - example, pumping is a great excuse to not give paid maternity leave because LOOK! moms can attach plastic suction cups to their boobs and have other people feed their babies breast milk! I was very surprised by the WIC program that gives better benefits to moms that breastfeed over moms that give their child formula (even if it's because the mom CANNOT breastfeed). I was APPALLED by what I read regarding WHO, UNICEF, breastfeeding, and HIV. Very interesting reading for anyone that has breastfed or is planning to in the future.

Choices are important and we should have them. To have a baby or not to have a baby, to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, to breastfeed or not to breastfeed -- these are all choices that are up to women/mothers/parents. While I have opinions on what I think a person *should* do, it isn't up to me.

I chose to breastfeed (I also chose to vaccinate because *science*). Evie was exclusively breastfed for the first ten weeks, but then she went to daycare and we introduced breast milk via bottle. I pumped for months. I hated every second. I pumped because "breast is best" and I was under the impression that I was saving my child from measles (I know, silly, but there were all those measles outbreaks after she was born). Yes, breast milk does pass on some of those antibodies, but only for like a month. Anyway...breastfeeding was really pushed on my at the hospital. One of my nurses gave me this very emotional speech about her own struggles with breastfeeding and how she just kept trying. It was intense.

I always knew I was going to breastfeed though, I didn't need impassioned speeches. I'm still breastfeeding now and Evie is 18 months old. I think the bonding experience is worth it, it's a comfort for her. I would do it all again and breastfeed if I had another child...but you know what I wouldn't do? I wouldn't stress out about pumping (I didn't take an actual lunch break for roughly 6 months) and I would've introduced formula much sooner.

You also might like...

Jaclyn Day says

This is an incredibly thoughtful and fascinating book. First, a few thoughts about the structure and then I'll go into more detail about the actual content. Structurally, it's repetitive. I read the same anecdotes or statements or research conclusions at least several times throughout. I know this was likely done to keep reminding the reader about the thesis statements presented earlier—but it could also feel like filler. I struggled with the book's tendency to file moms into very specific stereotypes to describe that particular group's breastfeeding agenda. You can see those stereotypes on the cover: feminists, fundamentalists, hippies, and yuppies. For clarity's sake, yeah, it's easier to just say "hippies advocate breastfeeding because of X" and

“yuppies advocate breastfeeding because of Y,” but I think (hope) we are smart enough to talk about the variety of reasons women choose and advocate breastfeeding without having to categorize them into just four groups. Small qualms here and there, but let’s get into the content. I can tell you honestly that I’ve read very few books on parenting or modern motherhood that were so convincing or eye-opening as this. It changed my perspective on so many things.

The book first establishes the rise and fall of breastfeeding over the past century or so, giving some broad context to where we find ourselves today. And that place is, of course, one where breastfeeding reigns supreme, where it has become a marker of good and responsible parenting, where it defines the kind of mother you are and the kind of person you want your baby to become.

The writing is very surgical, wasting nothing on fluff, with Jung really drilling down and questioning some of the modern reasons women choose to breastfeed. She tears apart breastfeeding research, talking to the most respected doctors and researchers in the field. If you’ve ever read that breastfeeding affects IQ, or prevents certain diseases, well—Jung finds out the research to support those claims is virtually non-existent or the sample pool is too small or distorted to be taken seriously.

She also discusses the history of formula, the contemporary feminist discourse on a woman’s right to breastfeed, the shame of being unable to breastfeed, the privilege and racial disparity that goes hand-in-hand with the ability to breastfeed exclusively for at least 6 months, the folly of treating a lack of breastfeeding like a national health crisis or necessitating public health interventions, the astonishing differences between the benefits breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding WIC recipients receive, the HIV-through-breastmilk deniers that are still affecting transmission rates today...this book covers so much. And most of it is infuriating and frustrating.

The part that I want to call out in a bit more detail is the thoughtful and methodical attention Jung pays to how American society and modern mothers equate breastfeeding benefits with pumping. Somehow we’ve radically redefined and accepted this new definition of breastfeeding. And pumping is not feeding—it’s lactation, Jung points out. Is there a woman alive who likes to pump her breastmilk? Who enjoys it? (I personally found the experience frustrating, uncomfortable, occasionally painful, demeaning, and time-consuming.) But I did it, and most women do it or try to do it because we believe we are providing the same benefits to our babies that they would receive feeding from the breast, despite no evidence to support that belief. The reason, Jung says, that we do this is multi-layered. Most women who pump have jobs, and those women want to provide for their infants in a tangible way even if they can’t be with them every hour of every day for the formative months of their baby’s life. We, American women generally, also pump because it’s in the best interest of politicians and the companies we work for if we keep pumping. Breast pump manufacturers, hospitals, insurance companies, lactation consultants—they all just get in line too. I just read an article this morning that talked about the Affordable Care Act “breastfeeding rights.” (Sidenote: some of the research in that article is more or less eviscerated in Jung’s book too.) But most of the provisions in the ACA didn’t give us breastfeeding rights. They gave us the right to go back to work and pump at our leisure. Jung brings this back to—guess what? Mandatory, paid maternity leave. So long as we believe that breastfeeding = pumping, and we are, maybe 6 weeks after giving birth to another human, celebrating our right to be stuck in a supply closet for 45 minutes of milk production 3x a day, there is no incentive for politicians to seek paid maternity legislation. Jung could find only 3 articles on employment and breastfeeding in the United States, but found hundreds describing and analyzing the problem of racial disparities in breastfeeding. She notes: “It’s hard to resist the conclusion that the reason public health initiatives and policy makers don’t discuss the effect of maternal employment on breastfeeding rates is that doing so would focus attention squarely on America’s famously skimpy maternity leave.”

So, I love this book. It made me think critically about issues I’d never had to think about or had never considered and I appreciate that. It’s available for pre-order now and will be released on November 24.

Thanks to Perseus Books and Basic Books Group for the opportunity to read this book in exchange for a

review.

Sarah says

To start, as the book's description says, this is not an anti-breastfeeding book. A large part of it examines the dissonance between America's push to breastfeed but then lack of support in helping mothers to do so (as in we are the only developed nation in the world without paid maternity leave). I appreciated the author's extensive examination of studies about the health benefits of breastfeeding, whose results are not nearly as positive as many "lactivists" say. This will help to alleviate guilt for women who can't (or simply choose not to) breastfeed. My only complaint is that when describing some Fundamentalist Christians' views on breastfeeding, the author simply describes them as Christians, which is over generalizing and misleading. (9/21/15)

I received an ARC from NetGalley! (9/10/15)

Carol Palmer says

I went to a conference on human lactation in 2001. There are two talks that still stick in my mind. The first was a woman working in a maternity hospital in Ghana. One out of five of new mothers were HIV positive. Despite the risk of them passing it on to their babies via breastfeeding, most of these women did it. Many did not have access to clean drinking water to make up the formula and there was also the stigma of using formula - it meant you were HIV positive.

The second talk was giving by a scientist showing that asthmatic women who breastfed their children were more likely to have asthmatic children than asthmatic women who formula fed their children. The lactivists came out and fiercely attacked the woman's data. My boss and I looked at each other - WTF?

This book is great at showing how the movement to more breast feeding has now turned into backlash against women who choose not to breast feed or are unable to breast feed. Women who get WIC benefits get better benefits if they breast feed regardless if they have lactation failure or are on anti depressants that could harm a breast fed infant. Women are pressured by doctors and the general public to breast feed.

This pressure to breast feed has created a huge industry in breast pumps. Since the US does not have the maternity leave program most countries have, women are back to work 6 weeks or less after the baby is born. Many use breast pumps, but are given broom closets or rooms with large windows to pump in. Some women get their paychecks docked for the time they take to pump at work. Many women resort to pumping in the car during their commutes. Doesn't that sound safe?

The breast feeding trend has come from many flawed studies regarding the health benefits of breast milk. The vast majorities of these health benefits only occur in developing nations without access to clean water. The benefits in the developed world are very modest. The best study is the PROBIT study which showed some cognitive benefits to breast feeding. One thing that was pointed out is that this study was done in Belarus where very few women use breast pumps. There have been no good studies on the benefits of breast milk on cognitive abilities between those babies that get milk straight from the breast or those who drink pumped milk.

The one problems I had with the book was she states, "...there has never been a time when women didn't breastfeed." Duh, we're mammals.

Bottom line, don't harass a woman who doesn't breast feed her baby. She may have very valid reasons that are none of your business.

Dan says

This book got a lot of attention when it was launched- a number of fairly positive reviews and a smattering of summary style articles by Jung in major publications, yet I haven't heard much discussion of Jung's major arguments in my social circle, which happens to be filled with current and former breast feeding parents. And Jung's arguments are strong. To just skirt over a few highlights, Jung delves into the history of breast feeding, wet nursing, formula feeding and breast feeding advocacy (some of it not in as much depth as you'd like) and there are a number of surprises. Among them the retrograde anti-feminist politics of La Leche League, the long history of wet nursing are things that are probably news to people of my generation. Jung argues that the promoted health benefits to in infant of the recommended six months of exclusive breast feeding are overblown to the point of fraudulence and the costs to women of breast feeding is understated. The scientific studies that show the benefits of breast feeding are necessarily not double blind, but even by observational study standards are weak- a study of the effect of breast feeding on type 2 diabetes that does not control for known predictors of diabetes like family history of obesity probably isn't reliable. She ultimately finds evidence that breast feeding slightly decreases a child's chance of four types of infection: ear, gastrointestinal, respiratory and necrotizing enterocolitis with all other health benefit studies being at best inconclusive. She points out that the new culture of breast feeding is actually breast pumping- instead of six months of maternity leave where mothers actually breast feed their babies, mothers in America are returning to work (30% of mothers in America take no maternity leave at all) where they pump milk to bottle feed their children. Under the ACA employers must provide time and space for mothers with children under one year old to pump at work, but the employer does not need to pay the mother for pumping time, meaning nursing women find themselves working 9 or 10 hour days for 8 hours of pay (or, as my wife did, working double time, through breaks and bringing work home to make up for pumping time). And if the employer does not comply with the mandate there is no enforcement mechanism or punishment in place anyway. In essence, pumping has replaced maternity leave in the US. For all of the supposed benefits of breast feeding, no one has truly studied whether these benefits are from drinking the milk or from the act of breast feeding- the social benefit of being near the mother has gone out with the bathwater here, as it would yet again be an argument for extended paid maternity leave. Lastly, if you think that the people who make formula are evil corporations hell bent on nothing but profit while the people who make breast pumps and nursing accessories are fundamentally in it just to make the world a better place, you don't understand capitalism. Included is an entire chapter about how major breast feeding organizations along with the WHO suppressed or ignored science that clearly indicated that HIV could spread through breast milk for fear that spreading such information would discourage breast feeding- meaning that La Leche League believes (to this day) that it's better your kid get AIDS than formula. A lot of organizations and individuals come off looking pretty bad here, especially La Leche League and WIC. Believe it or not, this all just scratches the surface.

There are certainly moments where Jung's stridency gets in the way and she sometimes misses the mark. When she writes that six women have to breast feed exclusively for six months in order to prevent one ear infection she assumes this means that when confronted with such a marginal gain some women might choose not to breast feed. As a suburban parent, I feel like that's a fundamental misunderstanding of the mommy wars- in my experience there's really no amount of discomfort that parents (especially mothers) in some communities will go through to give their child some sort of advantage, no matter how minor. She misses

another mark talking about a tax break associated with breast pumping hardware. Congress passed a tax break on costs associated with materials to help with breast feeding when they take up over 7.5% of a family's adjusted gross income. She says, "For people in the lowest tax bracket, the tax deduction might reduce the cost of a \$300 pump to \$270" but this is irrelevant because people in the lowest tax brackets don't itemize and therefore the savings are only accessible to those in the highest brackets. But she's wrong there- if your family of four as a middle class AGI of \$100,000, you'd have to spend \$7,500 on breast pumps and related materials to to the 7.5% and get a deduction. The break is worse than a tax break only for rich women, it's a tax break that's supposed to help working mothers but in fact helps no one.

All of this said, Jung breast fed her children and says knowing what she knows she would do it again- she's not against breast feeding but rather against the way compulsory breast feeding policy bullies, lies to, and infantilizes women. It's a conversation worth having and I don't know why more people aren't having it.

Meg says

When you're pregnant or have a newborn, you get a lot of questions from both strangers and acquaintances. "How are you feeling?" "Boy or girl?" "Are they sleeping through the night yet?" "Are they teething?" But one of the most ubiquitous is "Are you breastfeeding?" I've gotten this question from friends, family members young and old, work colleagues, my dental hygienist, my optometrist, and random strangers. It's never "What are you feeding them?" It's "Are you breastfeeding?" Or sometimes even "You're breastfeeding, right?" And even though I did opt to breastfeed my baby, I started to resent the assumption that I was. What if I had answered "No?" (that is assuming it's anyone's business in the first place, which it isn't).

All this to say *Lactivism* was an insightful and refreshing read. I have absolutely no issue with breastfeeding advocacy and education, and women absolutely do still get shamed for breastfeeding their babies (especially if they choose to do so in public). But there is a flip side to it as well, that shames and even punishes women who *do not* breastfeed (for whatever reason). I'm thankful for Courtney Jung's book for shedding insight on this side of the issue. It was interesting to dig down into the actual scientific studies regarding the benefits of breastfeeding, as well as the history of breastfeeding advocacy. There is so much pressure as a new mother to do right for your baby, and I was glad to read this as a counterpoint to the incessant "breast is best" messaging. At the end of the day, "fed is best" and mommy war culture helps no one.

Carissa Hanson says

Fascinating. The title might have put me off otherwise, but I was interested to read this after reading an interview with the author on the distinction between breastfeeding and breastpumping, and how focus on the latter in public policy is not actually very mother- and baby-friendly, considering it seems to be a work-around for our country's appalling lack of maternity leave. This book surprised me, angered me, and made me reconsider my position on breastfeeding and public health policy. Some areas are weaker than others, but Jung is asking really good questions. Highly recommend.

Heather says

One of my criteria that will earn that fifth star for a book is really challenging my previous opinions. This book absolutely did that. I always knew there was a disconnect between my medical training surrounding

lactation and my life experience. This book put words to that. I won't say it was a fun book to read, but it really made me think.

Terri says

(I read an ARC of this book received through NetGalley)

This book will most likely make you angry. It made me angry. Let me be clear, this book is NOT a critique of breastfeeding as an activity to safely nourish your child. It is, however, a searing indictment of the lengths to which a segment of breast feeding advocates ("lactivists") will go in order to promote breast feeding over formula feeding, even in situations where formula is indisputably the best option for the child.

Jung also tackles the complicated intersections of race and class and how they impact what makes a "good mother" and how countries decide what to make important health policy and not to make important health policy. She highlights the outrageous shaming of poor women and women of color who may not breast feed for a variety of reasons.

As the title suggests, she also highlights the ways in which breast feeding has become big business and challenges the idea that breast feeding is "free" arguing that realistically, even ignoring the cost of women's time, it isn't appreciably cheaper than formula.

This book is important in fundamental ways, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Ozy Frantz says

I am outraged by this book's revelations about WIC. Women who breastfeed their children receive more baby food than women who formula-feed their children in order to incentivize breastfeeding. Maybe you guys could figure out a way to incentivize breastfeeding that doesn't involve starving children? It makes sense to give breastfeeding parents more adult food-- after all, they're eating for two and don't have any formula-- but it makes no sense to only give baby meats to breastfed babies. Isn't your whole idea that formula isn't nutritionally complete enough for babies? If anything, shouldn't you give formula-fed babies more baby food so they have more nutrients?

Jung's point that it's very unclear whether the (limited) benefits of breastfeeding come from breast milk or the experience of breastfeeding is well-taken. We know that cuddles are very beneficial to babies, to the point that babies deprived of physical affection suffer mental and emotional impairments and sometimes even die. Is it that implausible that breastfeeding increases IQ because it encourages women to cuddle their babies more? And if so, does it really make sense to encourage pumping? If your work is like "yes, you can have two hours to pump, but that means you're working a ten-hour shift and get two hours less with your baby," pumping could conceivably be harmful.

The chapter on HIV and breastfeeding was a mixed bag. Exposing LLI's connections to AIDS denialists is very good (I also appreciated the earlier discussion of LLI's early connections to anti-feminist religious people). However, Jung does not engage seriously with the risk of diarrhea and malnutrition from formula. Of course there aren't any places that have an 85% infant mortality rate, but that doesn't mean that in some places formula feeding would result in an 85% infant mortality rate. Many women exclusively breastfeed! Lying with statistics mars an otherwise excellent book.

Most of all, the thing I liked most about *Lactivism* is its reframing of the individualist "mommy wars" to a strong structural criticism of how society limits women's choices. We don't need to discuss whether breastfeeding is feminist or anti-feminist. We need to talk about WIC giving less baby food to formula-fed babies (! still can't get over this) and about the AAP playing up the fairly marginal benefits of breastfeeding. We need to talk about accommodating breastfeeding mothers in the workplace, including remote work and (gasp) taking the baby to work. We need to talk about better support for pumping mothers, including private and dignified places to pump and strong protections against sexual harassment of pumping mothers. We need to talk about parental leave-- and we need to talk about accommodating parents for whom for whatever reason parental leave is not the right choice. Only then will we have a society that supports all parents, regardless of their choices of how to feed their baby.

Andy says

Pretty good serious non-fiction. The author does a nice job of explaining how breastfeeding is nice but not the super-important duty it's made out to be by some. She makes the distinction between breastfeeding and breast milk and otherwise gets into details that turn out to be important. The supposedly "endless" benefits of breastfeeding are based on appallingly weak studies, which are contradicted by the stronger research. Unfortunately, these stories of stupid policy based on dogma and sloppy science are too common to be shocking.

Nikki Glassley says

I love nonfiction. I really love nonfiction where I get to learn about something I have zero personal experience with, and breastfeeding definitely falls under that category.

Lactivism was fascinating and infuriating, like most good nonfiction. It was incredibly frustrating to learn that the standards for breastfeeding research have been very low. Most studies do not allow control for the differences that also come from socioeconomic status, which is a serious problem since middle- and upper-class women are far more likely to be able to breastfeed than low income women.

I was particularly drawn in by Jung's chapters on breastfeeding at work and HIV transmission. That we've allowed breastfeeding to be equated with breast *pumping* and bottle feeding has weakened the argument for federal mandated maternity leave. If women can just pump and send their baby with bottles, she only needs time to recover! If a woman needs to be actually breastfeeding for the length the government recommends (6 months), then that is a serious problem that can only be fixed with longer paid maternity leave.

Overall, *Lactivism* is a fascinating history of the breastfeeding movement and provides a compelling interpretation of our current stance on breastfeeding. Anyway you slice it right now, women lose. Women who want to breastfeed are limited by a lack of support in the workplace (pumping policies with zero ways to enforce them, lack of paid leave) and women who don't or can't are shamed and even punished (women who formula feed can accept WIC for HALF the time as women who breastfeed and get fewer food vouchers) by a society that increasingly paints breastfeeding as an issue of good mom vs bad mom.

Shan says

This book is really important and deserves a proper review, but I think I need a couple of days to sort out my thoughts. Review to follow!

K says

I have four children, and there was never a question of whether I would breastfeed them. I had read about all the benefits of breastfeeding, and with all the uncertainty surrounding parenting, breastfeeding was on a very short list of things I knew I could do right. But when I had my first child, it was not that simple. Nursing hurt. Her feeding schedule was unpredictable. I felt tied down in all sorts of ways, physical and emotional, by the need to be on call for her and the pressure of being the only thing standing between her and starvation. When I returned to school and work after two and a half months, I had the added pressures of pumping to contend with at a time when there was far less awareness of the needs of nursing mothers in the work environment.

It was a stressful and anxiety-provoking period, and although I believed I was doing the right thing I struggled with a great deal of ambivalence. What made things even harder was being surrounded by family members who were militant advocates of breastfeeding. Of course, they were all stay-at-home mothers who had no clue about the challenges I was experiencing and didn't especially sympathize given that I had made different lifestyle choices. "Call La Leche League!" one of my relatives urged when I told her I was struggling. But I didn't want to call La Leche League. This same relative had blithely described La Leche League as an organization that would support my nursing by insisting I do it no matter what. That wasn't the answer I wanted to hear. I didn't want someone pushing a nursing agenda on me. In this, as in so many other areas, it felt as if my personal needs no longer counted now that I had an infant.

Thankfully, I got through that period okay. I ended up nursing my daughter, and my subsequent three children, for fourteen months each and have no regrets about having done so. Part of me feels that the pressure surrounding me, unpleasant though it was, helped strengthen my resolve to continue nursing and ultimately I'm grateful that I kept it up. But I do remember the resentment and anxiety I felt, and have wondered at times whether it was truly warranted. Naturally, I was extremely curious when I heard about this book and it did not disappoint.

Courtney Jung reports that she breastfed both of her children. She tells us that she's happy she did it. She also acknowledges that, for a variety of reasons, her breastfeeding experience was easier than that of many mothers. And she adds that the pressure many mothers feel to breastfeed may be unwarranted, coming from a conflation of societal agendas of varying origin and validity.

According to Jung, La Leche League was founded in 1956, when formula feeding was far more popular than breastfeeding in the U.S., out of an interesting combination of feminist and conservative agendas. From a feminist perspective, La Leche League wanted to empower women to wrest control of their bodies and childrearing practices away from the (largely male) medical establishment. At the same time, La Leche advocated for an agenda of full-time mothering and prioritizing childcare above all else, including housework and appearances. What further separated La Leche League from the feminists was the issue of whether to take a stand against abortion in the early 1970s.

Although La Leche League was a marginal organization for a while, breastfeeding got another boost in the 1970s when people became aware of high infant mortality rates in developing countries. These rates were attributed in part to the increasing popularity of baby formula in these countries, where conditions for preparing the formula were frequently unsanitary and poor mothers couldn't afford sufficient formula to nourish their babies. Idealistic Americans began boycotting baby formula companies and viewing

breastfeeding as an act of social consciousness.

Feminists, too, jumped on the breastfeeding bandwagon as an issue of female empowerment. And as Dr. Sears and his books promoted attachment parenting in the 1980s, our culture of hyperparenting lent more support to breastfeeding. Hipsters embraced breastfeeding as part of a larger movement toward socially conscious consumption practices that includes fair trade coffee, locally grown produce, etc. Fundamentalist Christians embraced breastfeeding as part of God's plan. Politicians claimed that breastfeeding would reduce nationwide medical costs. And businesses, such as breast pump manufacturers, stood only to gain by enhancing breastfeeding's popularity.

But is breastfeeding truly superior? Maybe a little, but not nearly as much as people would have you believe. According to Jung's investigation, the benefits of breastfeeding are highly overstated. Much of the research is mixed or inconclusive. While there is some legitimate research supporting certain benefits of breastfeeding, the list is far shorter than people think and the benefits are modest at best. Further, it remains to be clarified whether the benefits are due to breastmilk itself or due to other aspects of breastfeeding, i.e., the bonding that mother and infant experience during the process. Notwithstanding the marketing efforts of breast pump manufacturers and government regulations to make the workplace friendlier to mothers who need to pump, the milk itself may not be the issue here (this was particularly disheartening for me to read, although I do believe that my efforts to pump were worthwhile because they helped maintain my milk supply at a time when I was out of the house a lot).

In what may be the most damning chapter, Jung discusses La Leche League's alignment with AIDS denialists and dangerous support for breastfeeding by mothers who are HIV positive. I was so horrified I had to google this. Sure enough, consistent with Jung's book, La Leche states that "it is no longer necessary for HIV positive women to give up all hope of breastfeeding." According to Jung's research, although the risk of transmitting HIV to infants through breastfeeding can be somewhat reduced under very particular conditions, reaching these conditions is not always realistic; formula feeding, on the other hand, would eliminate the risk altogether. This type of fanaticism is akin to bombing abortion clinics out of an ostensible concern for human life; if the goal of La Leche League is to protect the health of infants, why would they promote breastfeeding in a situation that could only increase the danger to an infant's health?

As I struggled in my early days of nursing, I remember one relative's dogmatic insistence that there is absolutely no such thing as a woman not having sufficient milk, a position which is likely espoused by La Leche League. Jung debunks this myth as well. Although it's certainly far from the majority, a small percentage of women are in fact unable to nurse for physical reasons. To deny this possibility is highly irresponsible and does a terrible disservice to mothers and infants. Although I do think that nursing is a struggle for many mothers initially and, in my experience, is most often is due to a learning curve rather than to physical factors, it's important to explore all the possibilities rather than unnecessarily torturing yourself and your infant because of misguided propaganda.

Having said all that, I'm still a fan of nursing. The research has in fact firmly established some health benefits, even if they're not quite as far-reaching as we would like to believe. I'm happy that I got through my initial adjustment period and feel that both I and my children benefited from my breastfeeding in tangible and intangible ways. But I believe it's a personal choice, especially since the margin of benefit is not nearly as wide as is popularly believed. Aside from my interest in nursing itself, this book was a fascinating look at the way various societal agendas can converge to promote a trend with great emotional urgency at the expense of intellectual honesty.
