

# Breastfeeding: our common mother tongue

**D**o you ‘speak’ our universal ‘language’ of breastfeeding? We are mammals after all, and this is what we do, or at least what we should be doing. While it is mothers and children who are most directly concerned, in fact we are all involved one way or the other.

Regardless of geography and culture, breast milk is the only truly universal food. Breastfeeding in turn is an act of allegiance to our children, to ourselves, and to each other. Indeed, it is the ultimate nurturing and nutritional link – horizontally with the rest of our human family, and vertically with all who have come before us and all who will come after us.



James Akre

Embracing our shared nurturing and nutritional heritage is consistent with our status as mammals living in harmony with the basic laws governing life itself.

We thus need to examine carefully the naturally doubtful view that somehow we can diverge, with no unpleasant consequences, from our pre-established nurturing and nutritional path. Where mammals in general are concerned – ours is one of about 5400 species – this path has been evolving for some 260 million years.

Restoring the primacy of breastfeeding requires stimulating sound judgment and finding new ways of informing mothers and fathers, children, extended families, health professionals, employers, trade unionists, governmental and political authorities, and other members of society. Often, making breastfeeding totally ordinary

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once more – this is how I define our goal – implies a significant collective shift in awareness, attitude and action.

What I am saying can also be described this way. I have concluded that it is not women who breastfeed after all; rather, it is entire cultures and societies which breastfeed – or variously do not. In other words, cultures and societies *as a whole* are responsible for producing and sustaining the complex mix of variables that result in more or less breastfeeding by the mothers and children in their midst.

I base this observation on a single universal constant across space and time. With only the rarest exceptions, *all* mothers love their children and consequently want the best for them. Where feeding behavior is concerned, ‘best’ is invariably a culturally determined value; we respond the way we have *learned* to respond.

This is why, if we want to improve breastfeeding practice, we need to modify the environment where it takes place, which is neither quick nor easy. To this end, it is important to understand how culture influences the biological norm for feeding our children, and to always view our shared food (breast milk) and feeding system (breastfeeding) not in abstract isolation but in their specific sociocultural context.

The best place to be? Where all people, because they are genuinely informed, caring and supportive, not only anticipate that mothers and children will breastfeed; since they are conversant in our common mother tongue, together they also help to make it possible for them to do just that.

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