Breastfeeding, it’s nothing new. “It was Hera’s breastmilk that made Hercules invincible” (HealthFoundations.com). Where did babies get milk from in the ancient times? They got it from their mama or from a wet nurse. A wet nurse is a woman who is capable of producing breastmilk and who breastfeeds another woman’s baby in the case that mama cannot produce any milk or cannot breastfeed for any other special reason(s). There was no such thing as formula, so the alternative route to feed baby was the use of a wet nurse.

The first liquid form of infant formula was created in 1865 by chemist Justus von Liebig. Eighteen years later in 1883, there were 27 brands of infant food. The formula provided fat but lacked essential vitamins, minerals and protein, that babies need. In the 1940’s and 1950’s, physicians promoted the use of infant formula and the infant formula companies invested greatly into promoting their product to the public. As a result of infant formula promotion there was a steady decline in breastfeeding. Infant formula was seen as safe, convenient, and just as good as breast milk. But it was originally created to feed babies whose mothers could not breastfeed.

My mother was born in the late 1950’s, she comes from a family of nine siblings. Although my grandmother breastfed her first few older children, she wasn’t able to continue to breastfeed all ten of her children; my mother was one of them. It was easier and convenient for her to formula feed her babies. Speeding up to the early 1990’s, when I was born the American Academy of Pediatrics was at battle with the infant formula companies to stop them from advertising their products to moms due to the negative impact it was reflecting on breastfeeding rates. I wasn’t breastfed, my mom wasn’t even given the chance to breastfeed. As soon as I was born I was taken to the hospital nursery, away from my mommy. My mom didn’t get a chance to experience skin to skin contact with me or learn to read my hunger cues. My mom expressed to me that breastfeeding was never even mentioned to her when she went to any of her prenatal
appointments for any of her three children. Infant formula became the norm in society and breastfeeding was seen as sexual taboo in the western culture.

Twenty-five years later, in 2015 I got pregnant with my first born. I received a great amount of breastfeeding education and resources from multiple organizations including the hospital where I delivered and WIC (Women, Infants and Children). Before I was educated about breastfeeding, I thought it was just good for the baby because it was natural and it had the right amount of nutrients for baby. But I learned there are many different benefits and recommendations for breastfeeding.

Some of the many wonderful benefits of breastfeeding for baby and mommy:
- Protects the infant from infections (ear aches, gastrointestinal, respiratory) and chronic (diabetes, obesity) diseases due to the antibodies that the breastmilk contains
- Promotes sensory and cognitive development
- Provides great comfort for child (teething, missed mommy)
- It reduces the risk of ovarian and breast cancer in mommy
- It helps mommy lose her “baby fat”
- Plus, it helps your family save money and it’s good for the environment!

Some of the recommendations for breastfeeding from the World Health Organization:
- Breastfeeding should be initiated within the first hour after birth
- Exclusively breastfeed for the first six months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding with appropriate complementary foods for up to two years or beyond.
- Breastfeed on demand
- Avoid the use pacifiers or bottles

I was so satisfied with all the education and resources that were available to me. This helped my breastfeeding experience be as successful as possible. I didn’t expect to have the best experience with breastfeeding because my mom didn’t breastfeed. I only had one cousin out of a large family, who breastfed her two children. I was going to be the first in my immediate family and husband’s family to breastfeed. I felt like the outsider. I knew people were going to judge me because breasts are sexualized in the American media.

And what do you know? All the weird and misinformed comments were expressed to me left and right about breastfeeding. “You should stop breastfeeding once he gets teeth”, “After a year the nutrients in your breastmilk are no good”, are just a couple of the comments I got. But you know what I did? I educated the people who came at me with their naive words, with the knowledge I gained from all the helpful organizations and research I did on my own about breastfeeding. Their responses, “Oh I didn’t know that”. Of course, it made my breastfeeding experience a little challenging at times, but I hope my knowledge resonated with them, so they don’t go judging another mama.

Some words of advice from one mama to another: Don’t stay quiet when people attack you for breastfeeding your child no matter if your child is a newborn or a toddler, kindly educate them about the topic so they can pass it on. Also, if you see a mama breastfeeding in public encourage
her and tell her she’s doing a good job. You never know it must just give that mama the confidence and courage she needed.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- How are we currently supporting women and families in breastfeeding?
- What are cultural infant feeding norms in your community? How do these cultural practices support or challenge breastfeeding outcomes?

References/Additional Resources

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2684040/

https://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/pregnancy/getting-ready-for-your-baby/breastfeed-your-baby#the-basics_3

http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/child/nutrition/breastfeeding/en/

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/breastfeeding/Pages/Benefits-of-Breastfeeding-for-Mom.aspx

https://www.health-foundations.com/blog/2015/01/05/a-brief-and-fascinating-history-of-breastfeeding-and-its-alternatives