

10 Things I Wish I'd Known About Breastfeeding in the Military

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My first child was born while I was on active duty in the US Navy, and I ran into every conceivable speed bump imaginable. I was worried, upset, sore, had virtually no support or family nearby, and plenty of "Booby Traps". Somehow I persevered through it all...but in looking back, it's a wonder I didn't just give up on the whole shebang. There are a number of things that in retrospect, I wish I'd known. I might have spared myself a lot of heartache and quite possibly the postpartum depression that I ultimately suffered from (that's a whole separate post that I promise I will write one day) if I had known some of these things *before* I started breastfeeding while serving in the military. So here then are **10 Things I Wish I'd Known About Breastfeeding in the Military**...some will make you laugh, some will make you cry and some I hope you don't experience, ever.

1. That my baby was going to turn my world upside down, literally. This one caught me completely off-guard. Before I had children my career in the U.S. Navy was all planned out. I was going to be that gung-ho, top-notch enlisted sailor who was going to make a career of the U.S. Navy. I was going to see the world, make lots of deployments, earn Sailor Of The Year, heck...maybe even go on to the Academy or some other officer program. That is until I held my baby boy in my arms and wondered how in the hell I was supposed to leave this little bundle to go to work for 8-12 hours a day, much less leave on a 6-month deployment. Sure, I was a bundle of postpartum hormones and nerves, but as each day of my 6-week convalescent leave went by, I found it harder and harder to come to grips with the reality that was facing me. I was the mother to a helpless baby who needed me with every fiber of his being. And I had to leave him. Period. It was heart-wrenching and devastating and something that to this day, fifteen years later, still makes me cry. I never knew the power of love or that of the mother-baby bond until I held him in my arms.

2. That pumping and stockpiling my milk while on convalescent leave would mean the difference between having enough milk and not. No one told me how important it was to start pumping while I was at home for those 6 weeks. All I heard from well meaning friends and family was to enjoy my convalescent leave, to bond with my baby before I had to leave him. That pumping wouldn't be important until I actually went back to work. Yes, I was told that I needed to make sure that I breastfed my son enough in those early weeks to ensure a good milk supply. But no one thought it important to increase my supply to *more* than I needed to combat that infamous drop in supply when you return to work. Or that it was a good idea to know exactly how my body would react to the pump *before* I needed to rely on it 3-4 times a day while at work. Or that by pumping ahead of time, I would have a stockpile of milk stored away for the inevitable 'growth-spurt' days or days that I simply didn't have time to pump because of the flight schedule.

3. How important it is to get your baby used to the bottle before you back to work at 6 weeks. Again, I simply did not know and did not have the resources, or support of someone, to tell me that it is so important to get your baby used to the bottle BEFORE you go back to work; and that it is even more important to reinforce the use of the bottle by the baby by offering it at least once a day while on convalescent leave. I fell prey to the trap of offering the bottle (actually my husband did since my baby would have nothing to do with me offering it) once or twice at about 4 weeks old and then forgetting about it until the day I went back to work. My baby simply refused to take the bottle, ever. I was fortunate to have a baby that reverse-cycle fed, and a caregiver who was very understanding and creative in her efforts to make sure he was fed. My son survived but it was nerve-wracking on my part to know that he would refuse to be fed for 12 hours or more some days.

4. That NOT nursing at night and giving bottles when at home WILL screw up your milk supply. This is a 2-for-1 and often they go hand-in-hand. Many women (in the military and civilian world alike) look forward to the day that their baby will sleep through the night. I know I sure did. But this can have huge consequences for the breastfeeding and working mother. Breastfeeding at night gives your body an extra boost of prolactin, the hormone that makes milk. This is integral to maintaining your milk supply, especially if you cannot pump very often during the day. While it is a pain in the A** to get up in the middle of the night (co-sleeping with your baby makes this a little easier) to nurse or pump, it really will make a difference in your milk supply over the long haul. The other problem that tends to crop up is the tendency to give bottles of expressed milk or formula when at home. Oftentimes this is done innocently at first, when it's been a long day and your baby is hungry, you haven't showered and dinner still needs to be cooked; it can be very tempting to offer your baby a bottle so you can take that shower and cook dinner, knowing you'll have a few minutes respite. The problem is this means that your breasts are not getting stimulated to make more milk. The more often this happens the more your milk supply will suffer. Remember: The more milk your baby takes (at the breast), the more milk you will make. And, give bottles at work and the breast at home.

5. Making breastfeeding friends IN THE MILITARY makes a world of difference in your success! I wish I had known other women in the military that were or had breastfed. I didn't and it made my time breastfeeding in the military a very lonely affair. There was no one to kvetch with over the rude comments of my co-workers, or my tyrannical Chief who told me that I was wasting her time requesting a place to pump. I had no one to bounce ideas off of or get tips about how to pumping in my uniform. Or to call at 0200 when I was feeling sorry for myself and just wanted someone who had 'been there, done that' to talk too. If at all possible, search out other women at your command, a neighboring command, through La Leche League or online that have breastfed or are breastfeeding while in the military. They WILL understand your complaining, your concerns and your questions because

they've been through it. Even if all they can offer is a shoulder to cry on, it is better than no support at all. Friends are the 2nd most important indicator of success among breastfeeding mothers after their partners, so find one or two!

6. That pumping SUCKS and some days you are just going to hate it. There really isn't any other way to put it. Pumping is the pits. It is time-consuming, it is boring, and you feel like a cow. I had to pump in a nasty, dirty, smelly restroom (head for you Navy types) with other women coming in and out, giving me glares and stares and sometimes a rude comment to boot. Many of you are also pumping in restroom stalls or the backs of Humvee's, maybe with little to no privacy, and probably with your share of rude comments too (see #7 below). Sometimes the very last thing you feel like doing is hauling out the pump, trudging down the corridor or p-way, hooking it up and listening to the 'reerwow-reerwow' as it sucks the milk out of your breasts. Yes, you know it is the best thing you can do for your baby, and you know that it is really important for keeping your milk supply up...but damn, do I have to do it again? And you long for the day when you can go to lunch with your co-workers instead of staying back to pump, yep...pumping sucks, literally.

7. That male co-workers WILL make jokes, period. Ok, this one isn't going to be PC, at all. I had hoped that in the intervening years from when I was on active duty to today, that the male of the species might have gotten a little more enlightened with regard to the function of the female breast. Apparently I was wrong. Men in the military (and elsewhere I assume) still find great fun in making jokes, noises and snide comments about breastfeeding, breastmilk, breast pumps and anything else to do with breasts. How many of you have heard mooing sounds when you walk out the door with your pump? Or were asked to provide a little milk for their cup of joe? I won't go into the slacker comments as that is for the next point on this list. Even with all the sexual harassment training that has been provided and drilled into EVERYONE's heads, it seems that a woman providing a life-giving fluid for her baby is still ripe for the joke, put-down and raunchy comment. Especially if you work in a male-dominated job specialty. I am truly sorry that this continues.

8. That you WILL be called a slacker no matter how hard you work, because of your "breaks". This one really gets me fired up! There exists a double standard that no matter how hard you work, nor what your rank is, you WILL be called a slacker for taking so many breaks to go pump. Now we all know that a pumping break is NO break at all. It is, as point 6 on this list showed, a not-so-fun-filled time of hooking a machine to your breasts to suck out the milk. Many of you are pumping in a restroom, not a *nice* break at all if you ask me. If you are lucky your command has provided you with a small room that might have some tables and chairs and an outlet for your pump. If you are really lucky those chairs are padded and you have running water, a refrigerator (for snacks and storing milk) and maybe even a radio or computer terminal. But it is still a working break where you are pumping! Not sleeping, or goofing off as anyone who has NOT ever pumped their breasts seems to think it is. What is worse is that many of those who do the loudest complaining about your breaks are the very same ones who take a 10-minute break every hour to go smoke. Hmmm...2-3 breaks a day for a healthy behavior (pumping) versus 10 or more breaks for an unhealthy behavior (smoking). This goes back to the age-old thinking that no matter how hard a woman tries, she will never measure up. Completely untrue, but there you have it.

9. How important it is to know your policies and regulations regarding breastfeeding/pumping. If you are going to go ask your supervisor for time and a place to express your milk, it behooves you to know what the policies and regulations are for your branch of service. To steal from the Boy Scouts, Be Prepared! It doesn't help your cause at all to go to your Gunny or Chief and not have a clue what is even allowed in the way of breaks for pumping or a place to go. Even better is for you to have a plan of action ready to go that specifies how long, when, where you'll need to pump, what supplies you'll need (or will provide), and what kinds of preparations you've made for emergencies, watchstanding, etc. That looks good on you and may very well help your cause. Now not all of the branches of service even have policies that give specifics (the Army for example just gives 6 months deferment from deployment, whereas the Navy even specifies the type of room that should be provided), but regardless it is still important for you to have some understanding of what you can expect to ask for and receive.

10. That you CAN do it and that it is ALL worth it! I've left this one for last because it is simply the most important. If nothing else, believe that you can be successful at breastfeeding. Do NOT go into it thinking that you will just 'try' to breastfeed. DO IT. Don't give yourself the option of failure. Set goals for yourself, 1 day, 1 week, 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 12 months...whatever works for you. And then DO IT. Find the help and support you need if you are struggling or have questions, but continue to believe in yourself and your baby. Your breasts are made to provide your baby with milk, and it is something that only you can do. It provides you and your baby with more than just health benefits, it is an indescribable bond that cannot be broken by time and distance. Realize that no matter how hard it seems at the time, whether you are on the firing range, sitting in the back of a tent pumping, sitting at a desk pumping, or overseas shipping your milk home, it is all worth it. When you come home and your baby latches on, looking at you with those big eyes, drinking in your milk and love...it is all worth it. Trust me on this one!