

Breastfeeding

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OUTLOOK



Guilty, Guilty, Guilty

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Often, someone says to me, “Yes, breast is best, but you don’t want to make mothers feel guilty, do you?” What a strange question! Apparently it’s okay for me to make mothers feel guilty if they don’t get immunizations for their babies, but if I mention another infection-protection mechanism, I’m out of line. Oddly, we don’t even presume there’s a choice for other issues. When did you last hear a colleague ask a parent, “Do you plan to use a car seat or hold the baby on your lap? Do you plan to smoke or not smoke after the birth of your baby?” If it’s car seats, smoking, immunizations, or other issues, we simply tell parents what is best, with the full expectation that they will do what’s best. We don’t ask. So what sort of message do we give when we ask, “Do you plan to breastfeed or bottle-feed your baby?”

Presenting the question with those words implies that breastfeeding and artificial feeding are equivalent. Heaven knows, we don’t need any more people telling women that artificial milk is as good as mother’s milk, or at least the “next best thing.” Further, in asking such a question, we delay establishing the cultural norm. When discussing delivery issues, we never ask, “Do you want to have a vaginal or cesarean delivery?” We simply assume that the woman is going to do the

“natural” thing. When discussing feeding issues, it would be much better to say, “Tell me what you know (or what you’ve heard) about breastfeeding.” This does two things. First, it establishes breastfeeding as the cultural norm. Second, it allows us to quickly glance at the mother’s attitudes, beliefs, and values. Usually, those who plan to breastfeed give some answer along the lines of “It’s best for the baby” whereas women who plan to bottle-feed often respond by saying how painful, inconvenient or distasteful breastfeeding is. That gives the interviewer a chance to talk about the woman’s fears, misconceptions, previous experiences or objections. It invites open dialogue. Asking which method she has chosen usually results in a dead end when she says, “Bottle-feed.”

So do I want to make mothers feel guilty for choosing bottle-feeding? A resounding “Yes” to this question! I certainly want to be respectful of the mother’s choices and feelings and values, but it’s my legal and ethical responsibility to tell parents what’s best for their babies — whether it’s using a car seat or breastfeeding. If they feel guilty for making a second-best choice, they should. Every baby deserves the best that the parent can provide.