

Breastfeeding: Providing Food Security--and Security through Feeding

Imagine a banquet set for millions of people. The food is of the highest quality, uniquely suited to the needs of the individual diners. In addition to providing perfect nutrition, it also comes seasoned with disease-fighting immunological boosters, and best of all, it is free for the taking. Not only that, but the faster the food disappears from the tables, the faster it is replenished. And this banquet is available 24 hours a day!

What a boon to world hunger such a banquet could be, and what a waste to ignore it, especially if the banquet attendees are all infants and children. While the banquet description provides an interesting visual, of course such a banquet does not exist. The feast it promises, does, however, and that feast comes in the form of breastfeeding.

At the heart of the fight to end world hunger is the goal of providing global food security. The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) explains:

*Food security means having enough food to maintain a healthy and productive life today--and in the future. Communities enjoy food security when all individuals in all households have access to food--adequate in quantity and quality, affordable, acceptable, appropriate and readily available from local sources on a continuing basis.*¹

Breastfeeding fulfills these criteria beautifully:

- \$ *Enough food to maintain a healthy and productive life today and in the future:* Not only does breastfeeding provide unequalled nutrition for the young child, it provides a dynamic source of disease-fighting immunities that protect the infant from a host of diseases and health problems throughout his lifespan!
- \$ *Adequate in quantity and quality:* With support and knowledge, most women are able to provide more than enough milk for their children, and even a malnourished mother can still provide high quality milk for her baby.^{2,3}



La Leche League International is pleased to join in the celebration of World Food Day, October 16, sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. This annual event seeks to end world hunger, and recognizes the need for intercultural dialogue to solve this global problem. FAO states:

*Intercultural dialogue in the broadest sense occurs every time people from different cultures meet and listen to each other's point of view. With agriculture, it takes place at meetings and trade negotiations and every time an expert from one culture shows another something new in the laboratory or field – and gets feedback on its appropriateness in the local setting.*⁴

Intercultural dialogue takes place at the most basic level when one mother shares her wisdom and experience with another. Mother-to-mother sharing is at the very heart of La Leche League, and ensures that one generation passes breastfeeding knowledge to the next, thus contributing significantly to world food security.

- *Affordable, acceptable, appropriate:* Human milk is virtually free, is the food that nature intended for young infants, and is beneficial as long as mother and child wish to continue.
- *Readily available from local sources on a continuing basis:* There is no nutritional source more local for an infant than his mother's breasts! As long as she continues to breastfeed, her breasts will continue to make milk.

It's Not Just the Babies who Gain Food Security Through Breastfeeding!

It's no secret that breastfeeding provides a host of benefits to the babies, not the least of which is food security. Less obvious, perhaps, is how the food security of everyone is impacted through the simple act of breastfeeding.

Food Security for Mothers

- Breastfeeding lowers the mother's risk to nutritionally demanding diseases such as anemia and osteoporosis.
- Breastfeeding helps space babies, allowing the mother's body to replenish nutritional supplies before adding the stress of another pregnancy.

Food Security for Families

- For every family member who is breastfed, the family saves money that can be used to purchase food for the family. The purchase of infant formula can use 20% to 90% of household income⁵ and therefore threatens the food security of the entire family.
- Not only does breastfeeding save money on the cost of alternative food for the infant, but it provides substantial savings on health care. Because breastfed infants are healthy, there are fewer trips to the doctor, and fewer costly medicines to buy.
- A breastfeeding mother who works outside of the home can concentrate on her work when she knows she is providing the best nutrition and disease protection for her infant.

Food Security for Communities

- § Communities benefit when everybody experiences food security. When a community is well fed, limited resources can be used for needs other than food. Community programs to reduce hunger won't need to use their funds on infant formula if infants enrolled in the program are breastfed.
- Breastfeeding protects the environment as well:

*If every baby in the US was breastfed, it would save mother earth approximately: 86,000 tons of tin plate which would have been used to create 550 million cans; and 1,230 tons of paper (providing the tins have paper labels).*⁶

- Imagine the benefit to the community if everyone had 8 points added to their IQ!⁷ Breastfeeding is brain food, so every member of the community who is (or was) breastfed adds to the intellectual capacity of that community.

Security through Feeding

While the impact of breastfeeding on food security is undeniable, it is important to remember that breastfeeding is more than just a delivery of nutritious and disease-fighting food. A breastfed baby enjoys not only food security, but also that wonderful feeling of security through that feeding. Babies thrive on human touch, and perhaps it is no accident that delivering the food nature intended also provides the skin-to-skin contact so necessary to the psychological development of a young baby.

We owe it to our babies, our families, our communities, and the world as a whole to see to it that babies—who are born to be breastfed—ARE breastfed. When that happens, food security for the youngest members of the global community will be assured.

*I leave it to historians and other knowledgeable persons to describe how it came to pass that, as we enter the third millennium, so many babies and mothers, in so many countries around the world, are deprived of the miracle that is breastmilk.*⁸

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References:

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