

## The Boob Job By Zalina Gazali

You must breastfeed your baby, they said. Breast milk is chockfull of nutrients your baby needs, they enthused. It's what nature intended, they chorused. Sure, there could be difficulties, they whispered, with a dismissive wave of the hand. But for most it's as easy as ABC, they assured. It saves you time and money, they roared as if to clinch the deal.

Whether it was books I read, people I spoke to, medical experts I encountered, they all echoed the same rah-rah sentiments and gave me the thumbs up at my decision to breastfeed. Encouraged, I read up all I could on the benefits of nursing, bought items that could enhance the breastfeeding experience (and there are puh-lenty of such items in the market...I even bought myself a breast shield; a glorified apron meant to give modest covering to the breastfeeding mom) and waited in excitement at the special and exclusive role I was going to play when the baby came.

When the miracle called childbirth finally graced me with its presence, I fully expected my mammaries to overflow with the milk that was to be the sole sustenance for my baby in its immediate young life. I expected her to latch on as natural as could be (I watched enough TV to know newborns had an instinctive urge to nurse as soon as they came into the world). I expected to look every bit the calm mom, cuddling a baby wrapped in soft blanket, smiling down as the baby nursed quietly...the very picture of serenity you often saw in baby books.

What I did not expect was my baby to have a crying fit and seem almost alarmed at the sight of my breasts...I could practically see the panic in her eyes that she was expected to latch on a body part that was bigger than her head. And I most certainly was not prepared for the appendages on my chest to swell to a size usually associated with men's sporting events and involving a large field. And the PAIN. Oh gosh, the PAIN. The books somehow glossed over the part about engorged breasts feeling like three dozen antelopes were trampling on them. And no one let on that your breasts could turn delinquent and not necessarily adhere to the theories spewed on how they were supposed to behave. I didn't realise words used in breastfeeding literature like "discomfort" and "problems" actually meant "mind-numbing soreness that hurt like heck" and were actually code for intense throbbing and smarting that had no real remedy. And I never thought I could shed so many tears (not of joy) during the breastfeeding journey.

But I was adamant at giving my daughter the best only a mother could provide. The difficulties I encountered notwithstanding, I had full faith in the benefits of breast milk and the nutritional and emotional advantages it could bring to my baby. And I believed in the bonding and closeness that it would bring between my baby and her mama.

So I persevered. Whatever was thrown at me, I tried to bear as well as I could. Sore nipples. Aching hands at expressing breast milk for what seemed like every hour. Engorged breasts. Mastitis (breast infection) and the accompanying fever and chills; four times in two months. Worry at not producing enough milk for my baby. Distress at having to supplement my baby's breast milk intake with formula. Visits to the hospital to seek help from the nursing experts and having my swollen breasts manually pressed to help the milk flow. It was like having to go to military Boob Camp. But I persisted and in the end...

I cuddled, I fed, I conquered.

In turns out that to breastfeed my daughter was the best decision I ever made in my maternal life. After the initial two to three months of toughing it out, my body decided to co-operate and it was pretty much smooth flowing (pun intended) after that. After all the drama, I soon derived much joy in the breastfeeding experience. I loved the special mom-baby time it allowed us. I enjoyed the warm hugs I exchanged with my daughter as I nursed. I liked the convenience of not having to pack hot water and bottles on outings. I appreciated the ease of being able to comfort her or lull her to sleep just by nursing. I was thankful for the healthy effects breast milk provided: fewer allergies and less days of sickness. And I adored feeling like a bona fide mum who could give my child sustenance no modern technology could properly duplicate.

I continued to breast feed (whenever I could and at nights and on weekends) after I went back to work. And the task of expressing and storing milk in the office was relatively uneventful and surprisingly fuss-free. I reluctantly weaned her off as she approached four, as I knew she no longer relied on breast milk for nutrition and there were other ways for me to bond with her. Plus it would have seemed pretty awkward, not to mention embarrassing, for a five-year old child, clueless to the rules of social etiquette, to grab hold of my breast during MRT rides and start feeding. So I figured the time when she could properly chew a steak was as good a time as any to end my stint as a breastfeeding mum.

I do miss it. And if I had to do it all over again, I would do so in a heartbeat.

~ By Zalina Gazali, Mother of Irdina Iman.

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