AIMS For a better birth...

Breast Language

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Emma Pickett asks if we are sending out the right messages when using breast language.

We all know the power of language and there surely can't be a time when it matters more than in the world of maternity. New mothers and parents need to speak and be heard when it comes to their birth and in describing their own feelings about this new stage in their lives.

Those of us who support them need to ensure we listen and empower parents to make their choices with all available information.
And what a pain it is when the basic vocabulary we have at our disposal sends unhelpful messages and puts roadblocks in our way. Even when we set out with the best intentions, the tools we have been given trip us up.

As a lactation consultant, I'm talking about the word 'breastfeeding'. It's a word I use a hundred times a day and it's incredibly unhelpful. It creates enormous misunderstandings and confusions that do babies and their carers a massive disservice. It wastes so much of our time.

For starters, we've got 'breast'. It's a word not all of us want to use to describe a part of our bodies. Some prefer 'chest'. Some prefer 'boobs', which feels friendlier. Some have historically felt that highlighting the label for the part of the body which our society has so powerfully sexualised, immediately puts us at a disadvantage when it comes to encouraging new mums and a new acceptance of breastfeeding in a bottle-feeding culture.

'Nursing' is often used as an alternative in the English- speaking world but I don't know many outside of the USA who are comfortable with that. For me, it feels like a step too far to avoid saying the word <whispers> breast. If you told me that you'd seen a woman nursing in the local library, I'd assume that meant she was dishing out some bandages. I've got three dictionaries in front of me and nursing is all about caring for the sick, infirm and elderly. New babies are powerful and wonderful and far from 'sick'. Wet nurses may have done some 'nursing' but that hasn't always been to the benefit of mothering or new baby and parent relationships. And if we're going to call breastfeeding 'nursing', the internet search is going to become a very confusing experience.

However, all that said, I can cope with the word breast. It's the attached word 'feeding' that I really object to.

If we spend an hour talking to a new parent about 'responsive parenting' and 'relationship building' and

how we expect babies to come to the breast frequently and how communication with your baby is paramount, to then call it 'breastfeeding' is potentially damaging.

'I can't work out if he's hungry.' 'He can't be hungry. He's only just fed.' 'I don't want her to use me like a dummy.' 'I'm trying to stretch him a bit between feeds so he'll feed better.'

There are apps for measuring feed length, gadgets that measure how much a baby is swallowing, parents who are renting scales and weighing babies before and after feeds to assess millilitres of intake. It's all about the milk, milk, milk.

IT'S NOT FEEDING! OK, it's a bit about feeding... but there is a world beyond that and beyond it simply being about milk. Does your baby want to return to the breast again? Fabulous! Is he coming because he just wants some more milk? Maybe not. That's fabulous too.

It's great to empower parents to recognise milk transfer and effective swallowing but it must come alongside the message that sometimes it's not about milk transfer. It's about a love transfer. This teeny tiny new person wants to be connected to you. They were born and as far as they are concerned, you are still one. They want to smell you and taste you and be warm with you. They don't know why and YOU don't have to know why either. We don't always have to know why a baby wants to come to the breast. It's OK to not know if your baby is hungry or whether they need comfort.

Call it 'breastfeeding' and immediately so much is devalued. Comfort is secondary and unimportant and even 'off-topic'. There are parents who genuinely think that when a baby stays on beyond active swallowing and especially if they fall asleep, they are failing some test, and yet the exact opposite is the case.

When we make the breast all about milk, we are the ones failing new mums and teeny new people who desperately rely on us to get the communication right.

In German, breastfeeding is 'stillen'. From the same root as the English word 'still'. You are creating a sense of tranquillity in the baby, giving them an inner stillness and peace. Now, that's better. It doesn't always seem to be etymologically accurate when you have a toddler practising breastfeeding gymnastics while simultaneously humming the Peppa Pig theme tune, but we can all get behind it.

But what can we English-speaking people do? 'Stilling' is just a bit too close to the world of gin-making. I think we're stuck with 'breastfeeding' or rather 'breastfeeding- but-of-course-it's-so-much-more-than-just-breastfeeding- sometimes-I-wish-it-wasn't-called-breastfeeding-as-that- devalues-so-much-of-the-experience'. Less snappy within the name of a support organisation it must be said. But perhaps talking about the flaws within the vocabulary is a good way in to making sure parents get the right messages about what matters to their baby and what will end up mattering to them.

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