

Taking the Controversy Out of Breastfeeding

Babies need to be fed. That's a simple enough statement, isn't it?

Maybe not. Ask any number of new parents and you'll find that almost every aspect of baby-rearing is layered with controversy. Fortunately, Kittitas County is home to communities that support growing families while they navigate their way through parenthood.

Whatever baby-feeding method a family employs, guidance and support are essential for a happy and healthy baby. If a mom breastfeeds and works outside of the home, then additional support systems are required from both family and community. These systems are even protected by law.

Breastfeeding workers are protected at a federal level through both the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Under the FLSA, nursing mothers must be allowed reasonable break time to express milk for one year after the child's birth. This break time will look different for each mother and each workplace. Every breastfeeding parent has different needs – moms need to pump about as often as they would feed their infant. An employer is legally obligated to provide breaks to a breastfeeding employee "each time such employee has need."

The FLSA also requires a sanitary and private space for nursing mothers to express milk. An employer must provide a place that is shielded from view, is not a bathroom, and is free from intrusion from coworkers and the public. Employers do not have to pay their staff for these breaks. But, paid breaks and unpaid lunches can and should be flexed to allow an employee to meet her breastfeeding needs.

There are some exceptions to the FLSA's requirements. For example, if an employer with fewer than 50 employees can prove that providing break time for nursing mothers is an "undue hardship," then that employer can claim an undue hardship defense if facing legal ramifications for denying accommodations. Otherwise, if an employee is not provided time and space to express milk as needed, the U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division could "file suit to seek injunctive relief under the FLSA." That means an employer may have to rehire and compensate for lost wages.

Pumping moms are also protected under the EEOC's Pregnancy Discrimination Act: "Women affected by pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions must be treated in the same manner as other applicants or employees who are similar in their ability or inability to work." Employers may not discriminate against an employee on the basis of current or past pregnancies. Since lactation is a medical condition caused by pregnancy and childbirth, it is protected!

It is crucial that these simple accommodations are made before any harm is done. Denying a working mother time to pump breastmilk can cause clogs and infections. It can also cause reduced breastmilk supply, which can make it difficult or impossible for a mother to provide her infant with enough breastmilk.

Employers also see benefits from accommodating their breastfeeding employees. Moms who are given break time and space for milk expression show increased productivity and loyalty to the company. The health benefits from breastfeeding result in less time away from work, lower health care costs, and

lower employee turnover. As Washington State introduces paid family and medical leave, employers may see more women return to work after having a child. It is important for moms and their employers to know the legal rights and requirements of breastfeeding parents.

It's important for everyone to know this: law also protects nursing mothers outside of the workplace. Babies should be fed wherever that baby is hungry. Negative comments and controversial media coverage surrounding breastfeeding has made some moms uncomfortable feeding their baby in public, whether it's by breast or bottle.

Since 2009, state law allows breastfeeding moms to feed their children in "places of public accommodation" (RCW 49.60). These places include swimming pools, parks, libraries, restaurants, buses, and more. That means a business is breaking the law if an employee asks a breastfeeding mother to stop, cover up, or leave. If you see this law being broken, you can report it to the Washington State Human Rights Commission (call them toll free at 800-233-3247).

Take away the controversy. Let's stop sensationalizing breastfeeding and allow moms to feed their babies without fear. Follow the law to support families with young kids in any way that's relevant to you.

- If you're in a restaurant where a mother is nursing her baby, continue to eat your food and enjoy your company.
- If you own a local business and an employee asks to use her break time and a private office to pump milk for her child, say yes.
- If breastfeeding didn't work for you, feed your baby in whatever way works for you and your medical provider.
- If you are an employer struggling to implement workplace breastfeeding support, call Public Health at 509-962-7515 for assistance with policies and troubleshooting.
- If breastfeeding is challenging but you'd like to continue, see the resources below for local breastfeeding support services.

We have a lot of support in Kittitas County for breastfeeding moms, as long as you know where to look. The Kittitas County Breastfeeding Coalition (KCBC) has a guide that can be found online at www.co.kittitas.wa.us/health/programs/breastfeeding.aspx. KCBC members are also kick-starting a Baby Café later this year for drop-in support for nursing moms. And did you know that KVH has a new Lactation Assistant? Or that Nurturing Naturally offers home visits to help breastfeeding moms? If you can't find what you're looking for, call 509-962-7515. I'd love to point you in the right direction.

Hundreds of babies are born in Kittitas County each year. Let's give every single one of them the support they need.