



Lactation Story: Guest Story

I had always known that I wanted to breastfeed. I thought that when my baby arrived, I would just put boob in his mouth and that would be the end of that. I had no idea the struggles I was about to experience. During my pregnancy, the United States was experiencing a baby formula shortage. When I found out that it was due to contamination, it scared me. The more I read, the more I knew that breastfeeding was going to be the best choice for my baby.

I was in active labor when I arrived at the hospital in El Paso, TX from Las Cruces, NM. I delivered naturally not too long after and remember holding my baby on my chest. He was perfect. A few hours later, I was given a packet to fill out and in that packet, it asked how I was going to feed my son:

formula or breast. I remember proudly checking off the breastfeeding box. I was transferred rooms and then the time came to feed my little guy. The nurses came in and helped me. They told me to hold my breast like a sandwich and to put it in my little guy's mouth. I was having a hard time doing this. He was small and my breast seemed too big for him. I also was having a hard time knowing where to put my hand to guide his head appropriately. The nurses brought me a manual pump and a small nipple inverter. The nurse told me to use the nipple inverter to get my nipple to come out so that it would be easier to get my son to latch. It was not working. Then, they told me to use the manual pump to pull the nipple out...that still would not work. The nurses asked if I wanted to see the lactation consultant and I said, "Yes." They told me they would put in a consultation and that the lactation consultant would be there to see me. Meanwhile, when my son would start to cry, I would hold him to my breast and try to latch him. On a few occasions, he would stay on for a few seconds and then come off. It was difficult and I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong. It just seemed that his mouth was too small, and I just couldn't get enough of the breast in for a proper latch. This is when I first realized that the issue could be my inverted nipples. During one of the times that my little guy was crying, a nurse checked in with me and saw I was having a hard time. I told her I knew I had colostrum to feed my baby, but I just couldn't figure out how to get my little guy to nurse. I showed her that I had colostrum and expressed some out. The nurse left and came back with some syringes and a spoon. She helped me and showed me how I could use the spoon or syringe to feed my baby. I took this approach to feed him. Some time had passed, and I asked to see when the lactation consultant would be by because I was starting to stress out about being able to feed my little guy. I remember them saying, "Oh, she hasn't been by yet? We will check on it."

Later that day, the lactation consultant arrived. I remembered her coming into my room and not knowing who she was at first. She had the hospital badge on but from her appearance and strong perfume, she struck me as hospital administration rather than a healthcare provider. She put on gloves and told me she was the lactation consultant. She picked up my son from the side bassinet and helped put him to my breast. It could have been that I was extra sensitive from giving birth, or from the stress of figuring out how to feed my son, but her approach and how she handled my little guy just felt a bit aggressive and cold. I can appreciate that she had probably done this countless times and knew how to handle newborns, but to me this was a delicate creature, my baby, who had just arrived less than 24 hours ago. As she helped position my little guy on me and helped guide my breast into his mouth, she saw and commented on my inverted nipples. We would get him to latch for a little bit and then it seemed like he would come off. I kept trying with her in the room and was stressed out. I was scared and frustrated. I remember saying, “He just won’t stay on. I don’t know how to get him to stay. It’s like he doesn’t want to.” She looked at me and said, “It doesn’t matter. He has too.” She continued – and while pointing her finger at me – said “If he doesn’t and he fails to thrive, it is going to be on you.” She put him at my breast, we got him to latch again, and then she left. I will never forget that moment and those words are forever seared in my mind. My heart sank and the mom guilt I felt at that moment is still palpable. I could not believe what I had heard, and I did not know what to say. It is not that I did not want to do it, I did not know how to, and I did not know what to ask. The lactation consultant made me feel uncomfortable, alone and unsupported.

I continued to struggle for the remainder of time I was at the hospital. I was released after a day and half, and things were not any better when I got home. I still was not sure what to do or why I couldn’t get my baby boy to latch. I hand-expressed onto the spoon and syringe fed my baby. I reached out to my doula and asked how much my son was supposed to eat and she told me at this point his stomach was no bigger than a marble but that soon he would be eating more so I was okay for the moment. She said he was soon going to be taking in at least 30 mL per feed. I started to panic. I looked for an ounce shot glass I had in my kitchen and used that to hand express into. I felt that this would help me keep track and see that I was at least getting the 30 mL my baby was going to need per feed. In between feeds, I researched inverted nipples, what I could do to breastfeed, and what I needed to get my supply to come in. Everything I read kept saying that it was going to be difficult to breastfeed. Then, I tried to search for information on inverted nipples and did not find much...or at least did not find much on the type that I had. I read a medical article that explained the different grades of inverted nipples and found out that mine were the grade three inversions. I also read that it was a high probability that I would not be able to breastfeed. My heart sank. I wanted my little guy to have my breastmilk for the antibodies. I had kept a good clean diet and was taking a variety of vitamins to ensure that I was going to produce nutritious breast milk for my son. Now, I was realizing that all my efforts were going to be for nothing.

I did not want to accept this. Through tears, I would sit at the edge of the bed squeezing out whatever I could into the shot glass, pick it up with the syringe and feed my baby. When my baby would calm down and go back to sleep, I would connect to the pump and try to get more milk. Nothing would come out. I would stop pumping and continue to hand express. I repeated this process over and over every couple hours. I was exhausted, scared and anxious. Over the next few days, my baby boy was getting a bit fussier and would cry more. My milk was not coming in and I was getting increasingly anxious. My baby's week appointment was coming up and I remember calling my doula scared. I told her I did not think my milk was coming in and I was having a hard time. I told her the pump did not work on me and all I could do was hand express. She said she would meet me before my little guy's appointment to look at the pump and to check out my breasts.

I met my doula outside the doctor's office and talked. She recommended I try using a nipple shield to try to get my son to latch on my inverted nipples. She checked my breasts and felt that they were engorged. She recommended I keep hand expressing and suggested that I may need to supplement, at least until my milk was in. My doula also said she would contact some of the midwives she knew and ask for donor milk if I was open to that. I was. I told her I was scared of formulas and wanted to avoid it as much as possible. After seeing her, I went into the doctor's appointment, fighting to hold back tears. All I was understanding right now was that my nipples were preventing me from being able to feed my baby. I couldn't understand why I was born the way I was and why my body was failing me.

At the appointment, the doctor checked my baby boy and noticed he had lost weight. She said it wasn't much for concern yet as all newborns lose a little bit of weight the first week but gain it back quickly. I started to cry, and I told the doctor that I was having a hard time feeding my baby and that I did not think he was getting enough. During the appointment, my baby started to cry and I tried to soothe him as best I could. The doctor asked if I would take formula and at that moment, out of desperation, I said yes. I fed him in the exam room with the doctor there and within a few minutes, my little guy calmed down. My heart was breaking. This whole time he was being fussy, it was because he was hungry. I was keeping my baby hungry. It WAS on me. I was failing him. I could hear that lactation consultant's words in my head, "If he fails to thrive, it is on you." The doctor sent me home with a couple bottles of formula and said she wanted to see him the next day for a weight check. I walked back to my car with my little guy in his car seat feeling absolutely defeated.

As I sat in my car, a friend from work called me. I tried with all my might to keep myself together. He asked how I was doing, as he knew I had recently given birth. My voice was shaky as I lied and said I was "okay." I went silent for a minute and then lost it. I began bawling and telling him how I was afraid and I was failing my son. I told him how I couldn't feed my baby and I was scared he wasn't going to thrive because I had "shit nipples." I said I did not know what I was going to do and that I had worked hard on keeping my nutrition up and taking all my

vitamins so that my baby would have good milk. Now, I was probably going to have to gamble my son's life on formula. I cried and said this was all on me. He listened to me and then told me to calm down. He said my baby can feel my stress and for my son's sake, I needed to get myself together. Then, he told me he had recently seen his son and daughter-in-law and that his daughter-in-law had commented how she had so much frozen milk from pumping. He said if I would be open to some of her milk, he would let her know I was in need and get some for me. I said yes as I would rather supplement with breast milk than formula. I used his daughter-in-law's breast milk mixed with the milk I hand-expressed to feed my little guy. Over the next few days, I saw my baby boy relax and become a much calmer baby.

Within the same week, a midwife my doula knew contacted me to let me know she had some donor milk for me. I went to see her to pick it up and told her my story about not being able to feed my baby and how traumatizing it was to know that I was the one keeping him hungry the first week of his life. She was kind and understanding. She sent me different resources and sent me an ad for the Baby Café in Las Cruces, NM. She told me it was a free support group for breastfeeding moms run by a lactation consultant and recommended that I check them out. I was a bit triggered and did not want to go initially when she said it was run by a lactation consultant. I immediately remembered my interaction with the one at the hospital and thought to myself, I don't know how they could possibly help, but I will go for the support group portion of it. Knowing that I had a history of major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, I knew I would be at a higher risk of postpartum depression and figured it wouldn't hurt to go.

The day of the Baby Café came and I was anxious. I didn't want to go and luckily I recognized that it was my depression and anxiety acting up. I knew for my baby's sake, I needed to go check them out. I got myself and my little guy together and we went. I arrived and I saw other moms with their babies. Some breastfeeding and some just holding them. I saw this beautiful chunky baby boy and thought, that is what I wanted to get my baby to. The lactation consultant, Kimberly, greeted me and immediately things felt different. Kimberly asked everyone to do introductions and when it was my turn, I was an emotional mess. I started crying and telling them how I was having such a hard time. Kimberly comforted me and informed me that everyone that was there that day had gone through some sort of breastfeeding difficulty. I could not believe it. The moms that I saw breastfeeding looked "normal." They made it look natural, just like I had imagined it was supposed to be. Some of the moms told me about what they went or were going through. It gave me hope. Kimberly let me know that I could see her one-on-one. After how she made me feel and hearing her speak during the Baby Café, I was interested in seeing if maybe she could help me.

I made an appointment with Kimberly and we started our journey to get me breastfeeding. Kimberly looked at my baby boy and didn't see any ties or anything else that would cause issues with his latch. She also checked his suck. Then, she helped me with positioning my baby and finally, helped with guiding my breast so that it would go into my baby's mouth properly. I showed her how inverted my nipples were and she agreed that they were the grade 3 inverted

nipples that I had read about. She explained how it was possible to get them to come out, but that in order for that to happen, the adhesions that held them in would have to be stretched and pulled out. She warned me that it was going to hurt. I told her I was determined, and I did not care how painful it was, as long as I could feed my baby. She explained and showed me different ways I could try to get my nipple out so we used the nipple shield for my little guy to latch onto. With the nipple shield, my baby could latch and suck until more of the nipple came out. However, as soon as I took my little guy off my breast, my nipple would go back in. I showed Kimberly that my inverted nipples may not be the only issue I had. Years ago, I had pierced my nipples because I wanted them to “look normal.” I knew I had inverted nipples, but with the piercings, they didn’t look so inverted because the steel bar held them out a little. During my pregnancy, my breasts grew and I had to take them out. I showed Kimberly where my nipples had been pierced and she said it was likely that I had scar tissue in my nipples from the piercings and that this could also affect why I was having a hard time breastfeeding. I showed Kimberly how, on one of breasts, when I hand expressed, my breast milk came out through the piercing holes and through some spots on my areola. On the other breast, my milk flow was a bit different because it was not pierced through the nipple, but underneath. My breasts were just an all-around mess. Kimberly sent me home that day with a prescription to keep putting my baby to the breast with the nipple shields.

I went home and practiced, but it was still hard. I continued to hand express and by this time, I noticed that my milk supply was finally coming in. I was now able to collect a couple ounces at a time. I would collect my expressed milk, mix in some of the donor milk and bottle-fed my baby boy. Once he was fed, I would burp him, put him down for a nap, and then get to hand expressing to prepare for his next feeding. I did this around the clock with determination to try to express as much milk as possible so that I could feed my baby more of my milk and less of the donor milk. I still practiced putting my little guy to the breast but it wasn’t as often as I wanted to. I returned the following week to the Baby Café group meeting where I checked in with Kimberly. Again, she helped me latch my little guy. I told her about how much more I was hand expressing and wished I could get that with my pump. Kimberly asked that I come see her with my pump so she could see what the issue was.

I brought my pump to our next appointment and showed Kimberly how I could not get anything out when I used it. She saw the problem right away. She saw that there wasn’t room for the suction to pull the nipples and told me my flanges were too small. Kim recommended I get larger flanges so that I could pump even if I wasn’t getting milk, at least to pull on the nipples so the adhesions could rip. I ordered the 36 mm flanges and as soon as they came in, I got to work. I would get on the pump for about an hour and finally, I was able to get some milk out. The larger flanges provided enough room for my nipples to be pulled through and the suction was strong enough to pull breastmilk. I was sore after pumping that long, but I was more excited that I had gotten 3 ounces out of each breast! This was the light at the end of my tunnel! So, I continued to hand express so that I could get milk out quicker

to feed my baby, then I would get on the pump for an hour and collect that milk for the next feeding. Then, nightly, I would practice latching my baby with a nipple shield. This was a lot of work and I had to take everything day-by-day. In my mind, I was making peace with the possibility of not being able to breastfeed, but I was happy that it looked like I was going to be able to provide my own breast milk to my little guy.

From then on, I went to the Baby Café and I met with Kim weekly. Every week we would work on something a little different. Kimberly saw how uncomfortable I was when I would try to breastfeed and she would have me try different holds to help with my posture. It seemed that the traditional cradle and football holds were not working for me. We tried using a cushion, but my baby would be too high up and my breast was too big so it seemed to smother him. One day, at the Baby Café, I arrived late, it was a full group, and the seats were all taken. I decided to take a seat on the floor near the padding where some of our babies practiced tummy time. I sat cross-legged and put my little guy in my lap and latched him with the nipple shield. He was at the perfect height. Kim looked over and pointed out how I looked comfortable. I was! It looked like we had found the right position for me to breastfeed.

I was starting to become more comfortable latching my baby using the nipple shield but now I was running into problems with how painful it was becoming. A couple times a week I would only try to latch my little guy once because of the pain. Some days, I would brace myself, and take a deep breath before attempting the latch because it felt like knives were going through my nipple. On one occasion, I inspected my nipples to see why they stung so badly. I noticed now, after pulling them out, they would stay out for a bit. This was a good sign. The adhesions that would make them retract were slowly letting go. I didn't realize that because they were staying out more, my nipples were becoming chapped and cut. Alongside of my nipple, there were small cuts and these cuts caused the stinging pain that would draw tears from my eyes when my little guy latched. I lathered them with coconut oil and would cover them with the cotton nursing pads in hopes that they would heal. It seemed to be taking them forever and at one point I thought they would never heal. One day, I was going to attempt to latch my little guy to feed him instead of giving him what I had collected in a bottle. He was being fussy at the breast and when I looked down, I realized that one of the cuts along my nipple had opened and it was bleeding. It scared me and I was afraid that I was going to feed my baby milk with blood in it. I felt awful that I would feed my little guy blood, so I only latched him on the opposite side with the nipple shield. When I went to use the pump, I decided to switch and try the 24 mm flanges that came with my pump. When using my 36 mm flanges, I would have to brace myself before pressing the on button because it was painful for the first minute until the nipple was out. I was afraid I would re-rip the cut open. I was relieved that although still painful, the 24 mm flange held the nipple together and blood would not come out when I pumped. At the next Baby Café meeting, I let the other moms and Kimberly know what happened. Kimberly told me it wasn't uncommon for nipples to bleed and it was not harmful to my little guy. I felt much better to know that if he ingested a little bit of blood, there was nothing to worry about. But

now, I was scared to latch him.

It seemed like if it was not one thing, it was another. I kept up with applying coconut oil and breastmilk to my nipples after pumping. We had almost made it almost to the third month of the routine and I was so happy because I did not think I was going to be able to provide breastmilk, let alone breastfeed my little guy. At my next appointment with Kim, she said she wanted to try to get me to latch my little guy without the nipple shield. I was surprised. I didn't think that it was something that was ever going to be possible, but if she thought I was ready, I was willing to try. I sat with my baby boy in my lap and positioned my breast. I rolled my nipple out like Kimberly instructed me to and brought it close to my little guy's mouth. He latched on. Kim said, "Look, you're breastfeeding." I could feel myself tearing up. It only took three months of determination, ongoing pain, and proper coaching...but we had made it! We did a weighted feed and found that my little guy took more breastmilk from me directly without the nipple shield in a shorter period of time.

My son is now 5 months and it looks like I will now be able to meet my goal of breastfeeding him at least until he is one – however, I do prefer to go as long as he would like to breastfeed. He is in a school/day care during the day so I pump for his school feedings; but when he gets home, I breastfeed. He recently caught a cold and I was so thankful to be able to directly breastfeed and keep him in bed. He got over his cold in a few days. At night, when he wakes up, it is such a nice feeling to just place him on the boob and not have to get up to prepare a bottle. My anxiety is lower if we are out because I don't have to worry about running out of milk in his bottle. My nipples still are a bit sore and it is still painful at times, but the cuts have healed and I am willing to continue to go through the discomfort just so I can feed my baby. I still take it day-by-day and I don't take breastfeeding for granted. My breastfeeding journey has not been easy, but it has been and continues to be rewarding. I now tell everyone who will listen, if they want to breastfeed, to start getting information early. Preferably during their pregnancy, so that they may be educated and will know what resources are available to them when their baby arrives. I also stress the importance of a supportive and passionate lactation consultant. Had I not come to the Baby Café, I am most certain that I would have believed everything I was reading about my grade 3 inverted nipples. Thanks to the support I received from the Baby Café moms and Kimberly, I am now doing what I thought was not going to be possible, and that is breastfeed like a "normal" mom.

Natalie Rivera