



UPDATED: AUG 12, 2020 · ORIGINAL: AUG 12, 2020

## 'Mothers are medicine'

MARY ANNETTE PEMBER

*Shashana Nenookaasikwe Craft is an Indigenous doula. (Photo courtesy Green Photography)*

Indigenous women celebrate being strong, resilient and latched after mainstream breastfeeding groups didn't meet their unique needs

Mary Annette Pember

[Indian Country Today](#)

Indigenous "lactivists" have declared this week as Native Breastfeeding Week. This is the second year a self-described grassroots group has organized the event. Due to COVID-19 this year, all events are virtual and offered on the [Native Breastfeeding Week Facebook page](#).

The benefits of breastfeeding are legendary. Breastfed children have lower rates of diabetes, allergies, infections, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, neurodevelopmental outcomes and other health problems. For mothers, breastfeeding helps reduce obesity, decreases rates of breast and ovarian cancer, and creates a strong bond between mother and baby. [Studies](#) show that breastfeeding releases oxytocin which reduces the symptoms of postpartum depression. Oxytocin, often called the love hormone, is secreted by the pituitary gland when breastfeeding.

Indigenous doula Shashana Nenookaasikwe Craft says breastmilk can help babies recover from an illness. Craft cites [studies](#) showing that saliva from a sick baby sends messages to the mother's body while nursing to produce antibodies to help the baby fight disease.

As a baby suckles at its mother's breast, a vacuum is created, according to lactation researcher Katie Hinde of Arizona State University in the [Washington Post](#). Within that vacuum, the baby's saliva is sucked back into the mother's nipple where receptors in the mammary gland read its signals, alerting the mother's body to create and adjust pathogens in the breast milk.

"Mothers are medicine," Craft says.

Craft of the White Earth Nation, is part of an extensive, informal network of grassroots lactivists, birth workers, mothers and supporters who are taking part in Native Breastfeeding Week. Craft also helped organize an Indigenous breastfeeding and perinatal support circle that has monthly virtual meetings.

"I was doing doula work long before I knew what a doula was," Craft says. Trained as a nurse she often explained the birth process and breastfeeding to her clients and offered them support.

Last year, Craft completed the Indigenous breastfeeding counselor training created by Camie Goldhammer of the Sisseton Wahpeton tribe. Yellowhammer, a clinical independent clinical social worker and board certified lactation consultant, is also part of the planning committee for Native Breastfeeding Week.

The United States Breastfeeding Committee declared August National Breastfeeding Month in 2011, but many Indigenous women felt that their needs weren't being met by such mainstream groups.

Native women, second to Black women, have the lowest rates of breastfeeding, according to a study in the [U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health](#). Overall, women of color reported barriers such as pain, discomfort, embarrassment, employment, inconvenience, lack of social and cultural acceptance, information and support.

Breastfeeding has long been a part of Native American traditional ways of child rearing, the practice has waned in recent generations. Federal assimilation policies, such as boarding schools, the Indian Removal Act and the relocation program combined have distanced Native women from cultural ways and teachings that traditionally supported breastfeeding, according to Craft and Goldhammer.

**SUPPORT INDIGENOUS JOURNALISM. [CONTRIBUTE TODAY.](#)**

As part of the Indigenous breastfeeding counselor training, leaders discuss how historical trauma from such policies affect mothering and how Native people were mothered, Goldhammer said during an interview with [Kailhwisaks](#).

"Many Native women grow up without seeing others breastfeeding but now they are interested in reclaiming our traditional ways, plants and ceremonies," Craft says.

"There is a huge movement throughout Indian Country to reclaim our birthing, breastfeeding and doula groups," says Takayla Lightfield, citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe.

Lightfield, certified breastfeeding counselor and doula, is part of the Native Breastfeeding Week organizing team.

"We teach people to trust their instincts and take cues from baby," Lightfield says.

Doulas and breastfeeding counselors offer emotional support and information. "For instance many people don't understand that after a caesarean section, their milk may be delayed in coming in," Lightfield says.

Jasmine Funmaker, Ho-Chunk Nation, recalls that getting her baby to latch on to her breast was difficult after he was delivered via a caesarean section.

"I felt like I couldn't move or get in the right position to feed him; my milk didn't come in right away so I fed him donor milk," she says.

Armed with knowledge from Craft and others in her nursing support circle, however, she was adamant that her baby should not be fed from a bottle.

"I fed him donor milk with a spoon and syringe; my mom helped me later with his first latch," she says.

Breastfeeding also helped with her postpartum depression.

"Sometimes I would drift into bad ways of thinking but those thoughts would drift away when feeding him," Funmaker says. "You're in the moment when you breastfeed; nothing else matters but you and your baby."

Indeed, even mainstream medicine is recognizing the health benefits created by the powerful bonding properties of breastfeeding. For instance, the typical hospital practice of removing babies from drug addicted mothers and prohibiting breastfeeding are starting to change. The [Canadian Pediatric Society](#) is recommending that babies with neonatal abstinence syndrome room with their mothers and breastfeed. Birdie Lyons, program supervisor for Family Spirit, told [Rewire News](#) that the bonding benefits of skin-to-skin touch between mothers and babies as well as breastfeeding newborns, outweigh the risks. Lyons is a citizen of the Leech Lake Ojibwe tribe.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), there are only rare exceptions when breastfeeding is not recommended such as when mother is diagnosed with galactosemia, a rare metabolic disorder, the human immunodeficiency virus, T-cell lymphotropic virus type 1 or 2, the Ebola virus, or is using cocaine or taking certain medications. The agency says that breastfeeding is safe during the COVID-19 pandemic if mothers take precautions and may not necessarily need to be stopped if mother or baby contract the virus.

"We really want to normalize breastfeeding again for our Indigenous mothers," Craft says.

Indigenous breastfeeding support circles incorporate support from grandmas, aunties, partners and other moms, according to Craft.

"We offer tobacco and talk to creation, asking for protection while pregnant, delivering and breastfeeding," she says. "It's all ceremony for us."

*Mary Annette Pember, citizen of the Red Cliff Ojibwe tribe, is national correspondent for Indian Country Today. On Twitter: [@mapember](#). Based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Pember loves film, books and jingle dress dancing.*

[Indian Country Today is a nonprofit news organization](#). Will you support our work? All of our content is free. There are no subscriptions or costs. And we have hired more Native journalists in the past year than any news organization — and with your help we will continue to grow and create career paths for our people. [Support Indian Country Today](#) for as little as \$10.