

AROUND THE FLEET

Motherhood, Breastfeeding, and Leadership: The Perspective of an Ambitious JO

by LT Gaby Cavins

The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months, followed by complementary foods with continued breastfeeding for up to two years and beyond. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), among infants born in 2015, 83.2% initiated breastfeeding. Of those, only 24.9% of infants were exclusively breastfed through six months. You may be wondering why a Lieutenant in the Surface Warfare community is writing about breastfeeding statistics. You may even wonder why it matters. As a mother who exclusively breastfed, a certified lactation educator, and as a leader – I will tell you that it matters a lot. It matters to the sailors we have the privilege of leading. It matters to their families and it matters to society.



I had my son between my first and second division officer tours. I am not particularly unique, but I am also not the status quo. I have been judged, passed over, and also celebrated and encouraged. I had the opportunity to spend my Operational Deferment tour at a command that was not only supportive of my career goals, but my personal ones as well. I worked for a Commander who was (obvious differences aside) just like me – a mother. She was extremely well versed in what was required of the command to support mothers during their prenatal and postpartum periods, but beyond that she was supportive and understanding of my goals while also ensuring I maintained a high quality level of work. She was also critical in guiding me through the various struggles that come with being a new parent – in my case, postpartum anxiety. I have heard horror stories of commands turning a blind-eye to requirements, even harassment toward new, particularly breastfeeding moms. I am a success story when it comes to managing breastfeeding and being a Surface Warfare Officer – at least as close to success as I could have gotten in my situation. It came with struggle, but support that came with it was key.

My story of navigating through motherhood as a breastfeeder and the SWO world has not been easy. I have been told that because I am active duty I wouldn't breastfeed. I have been told that my career is unrecoverable because I had a child when I did. There are care providers that have no idea how to care for breastfed children. I have heard people in leadership positions say breastfeed is a waste of working hours. If I have heard this as an Officer in the Surface Navy, I can tell you for a fact our Sailors are hearing it too, and even more so. I have made an effort both on my own and with Breastfeeding in Combat Boots to ensure that military members are equipped with the knowledge (both scientific and regulations) to make an informed decision about their feeding choices and goals. As leaders, we play a large part in that end goal. I would not have been able to meet and exceed my feeding goals without the support of my family and of my superiors.

It is still possible to breastfeed while TAD away from home – if that is what YOU want to do. I left when my son was 13.5 months old for a little over a month. I had left enough milk at home for him to have while I was away, and was able to donate what I pumped away from home to a family in need. It is tedious, but completely possible. It is also still possible to breastfeed while on a ship (barring deployment). I am mentoring and supporting a sailor who is doing just that. If you are of the school of thought that breastfeeding is a waste a time – I ask you to think twice. During my time on Operational Deferment I had to walk past the smoke pit two to three times a day to the pump room. Without fail, the people that were there when I started my trek to the pump room were the exact same people that were there when I was headed back to my space. Food for thought when a member of your command is a breastfeeding mother.

The key is support. This is not to say that being a breastfeeding parent precludes you from operations or other activities, but support and knowledge in accordance with the delineated instruction alone goes a long way. We, as mothers, are the best advocates for ourselves. Leadership – it is our responsibility to be aware and provide that information when necessary. I am extremely fortunate to have the journey of being a SWO and a breastfeeding mother that I have had thus far. Though I have met various challenges and critics, I have made it a goal to advocate for and discuss these issues to bring awareness and provide support.

I get asked frequently how I have balanced being a breastfeeding mother and a SWO. All I can say is that our job is to manage. I don't mean that to say 'manage to get by' but rather manage all of these areas of our lives and find pride and success in doing that. Knowing that we can't do it all at once, but we can be symbols of grace, leadership, and success in doing our best.