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Eating in public

One Gillette mother is part of a generation of women who want to make breast-feeding a normal sight



News Record Photo/Pete Rodman

Zara Hinds, right, 9 months old, cries for her mother Amber on April 22 at City Brew. Hinds is comfortable with breast feeding in public, and believes it is making a comeback.

PHOTO 1 2

Nathan Payne, City/Living Editor
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Amber Hinds isn't bashful about much. The mother of two has spent the past three years balancing work and motherhood.

As she stood swaying inside a local coffee shop during a recent afternoon meeting, her baby daughter, Zara, was latched to her breast. Nothing indecent was showing. In fact, save the position of Zara's head, nobody would know she was latched to her mother.

Yet, for about 10 minutes, a young woman who sat at a nearby table glanced up from her computer every 30 seconds or so, trying not to stare in Hinds' direction.

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She doesn't use a blanket to cover herself or her child because it's too cumbersome in her opinion. It's a choice that should be left up to each woman to make, she said.

The curiosity didn't bother Hinds. Neither did having to get up from her chair to go buy a second pastry for her other daughter, Nora, while balancing her pink-clad baby in one arm.

"I've nursed in a lot of different places and a lot of different settings," she said. "I guess I'm hoping I could normalize it for my kids."

But it was in one of those public places that Hinds was nursing recently that gained her some notoriety.

The confrontation

Hinds never had been confronted about breast-feeding her two children, Nora, 3, and Zara, 9 months, in public until after she moved to Gillette in February.

Hinds, her husband, Chris, and their daughters went to the Recreation Center pool for an afternoon of fun and relaxation.

During a break from swimming, Zara began to get fussy, so Hinds took a seat in a chair near the pool and began to breast-feed her daughter.

Not long after starting, a lifeguard came to tell Hinds that the activity is prohibited on the deck of the pool and that she would have to go to the locker room if she wanted to feed her baby, Hinds said.

"I sat up straighter, looked her square in the eyes, and said, 'State law says I can breast-feed wherever I am legally allowed to be,'" Hinds wrote in a blog entry that recently was posted on the Huffington Post.

Hinds, a certified lactation counselor and Le Leche League leader, had researched Wyoming's laws before moving to Gillette from Nantucket, Mass.

During a later check with managers at the Rec Center, Hinds learned that the lifeguard was misguided and the facility has no such rule.

She really isn't one of the militant moms who have been highlighted during recent debates about breast-feeding in public. She doesn't participate in breast-feeding sit-ins and protests, but she does believe she should have the right to feed her child whenever and wherever the need arises.

Moving to a state with a relatively strong protection for women who breast-feed was a relief.

She is part of a generation of women who are trying to make breast-feeding normal. They are a generation whose mothers breast-fed their children at some of the lowest rates and for the shortest periods of time in history as they fought their way into positions of equality in the workforce.

But the fight's not over, even in a state like Wyoming, a state where legal protections aren't actually as strong as a mother like Hinds would think.

The resurgence

It's taken more than 50 years, but after decades of a downward trend, breast-feeding is making a comeback, thanks to dedicated mothers like Hinds, new medical evidence and several worldwide campaigns to promote the activity.

It is a trend that is beginning to clash with both modern lifestyles and public perceptions.

Breast-feeding began to decline in the years after World War II with the advent of canned formula, according to Reba Lindblom, a public health nurse and one of five lactation counselors employed by Campbell County Public Health.

Advertising campaigns made the new substitute for breast milk the in thing to do for more affluent mothers who could afford the convenience of the relatively expensive powdered formula.

That downward trend continued through the past five decades, exacerbated by women fighting for equality in the workforce and households moving away from the traditional one-income model.

Lindblom can remember when she stopped breast-feeding her youngest son, who now is 18, at about the time she went back to work after maternity leave. That meant her infant son began to drink formula after only a handful of weeks consuming breast milk.

"I quit breast-feeding as soon as I came back to work," Lindblom said. "We didn't have pumps back then."

It was the norm at the time when employers weren't compelled to accommodate mothers and laws didn't protect them so well.

But during recent years, wisdom has changed, technology is better, and mothers are encouraged to feed their babies with natural milk for the first 15 months of life, she said.

Hinds recalls speaking to her mother about breast-feeding at about the time she began to nurse her own children three years ago.

"She only breast-fed me for about eight weeks," Hinds said.

Hinds, who worked full-time for a college when Nora was born, took time every day to pump her milk. And while traveling for work, she sometimes would take her baby along.

"I had a lot of trouble nursing her," she said. "I didn't know if I would make it to my personal goal of one year."

It wasn't easy, but Hinds made her goal and then some by sheer determination. At times, she ran from work to a nearby baby-sitter's house to feed her daughter during short breaks. Once, she even pumped her milk under her jacket while on a commuter train.

"I doubt anybody had any idea what I was doing," she said.

As the breast-feeding resurgence continues, women like Hinds, who are trying to breast-feed their babies

longer, continue to face challenges.

Not so cut-and-dried

When Hinds told the lifeguard that state law allows her to breast-feed anywhere she is allowed to be, it might have been a bit of an overstatement.

What Wyoming does have on the books is a protection for women breast-feeding from the public indecency statute. Basically, it separates legally women who may expose a breast while feeding their babies from those who flash their chest toward onlookers for no specific purpose.

But that statute only protects women from criminal charges, according to Tom Lubnau II, a lawyer and speaker of the Wyoming House of Representatives.

The two lines in the statute do not tell a business owner that he or she must allow women to breast-feed in their establishments.

“The owner of private property can make you put on shoes or take off your shoes,” Lubnau said. “It just means it’s not a crime.”

The exact wording of the statute reads, “The act of breast-feeding an infant child, including breast-feeding in any place where the woman may legally be, does not constitute public indecency.”

So theoretically, a restaurant owner could put a sign on the front door to his or her establishment that reads “no smoking or breast-feeding,” and he or she would have the right to ask someone doing so to leave.

In fact, a few years ago, a woman was asked to leave a restaurant in Wright when she began to breast-feed in the dining room, according to Lindblom.

The law that is on the books wasn’t amended to protect breast-feeding mothers until 2007.

But, while state laws don’t do a whole lot to protect mothers who want to breast-feed their children outside of their homes, women breast-feeding or pumping breast milk have significant protections in the workplace set forth by federal law.

That law, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which amended the Fair Labor Standards Act in 2010, requires that women be given adequate break times during the workday to either pump their milk or breast-feed their children. It doesn’t require those breaks to be paid for, but it does require the allowance be made for one year after the birth of a child.

It is a federal protection that Charlotte Terry, director of human resources for Campbell County, says the government entity has made for its employees a few times since that law passed.

The law goes on to require that businesses with more than 50 employees provide a private place for women to pump their milk that is not a bathroom and is shielded from other employees and the public.

That step is an important one if there is any hope of meeting the World Health Organization’s goal of getting mothers to breast-feed for the first 15 months of every child’s life, Lindblom said.

Lindblom, who began working as a lactation counselor in 2008 after being one of the first trained in Campbell County, has heard horror stories from women who she’s worked with in Campbell County.

“I’ve heard of moms at coal mines trying to get to one year and they have had men stand outside their offices and moo (while they pumped),” she said. “I think the toughest thing for these women is once they go back to work.”

Since 2008, five public health nurses have been trained as lactation counselors to help women who want a little extra help, Lindblom said.

“If they choose to breast-feed, we just cheer-lead them on to feed their babies however best they want to feed,” she said. “I don’t think as a society, we are really supportive. In America, we see boobs as a sex thing and not a way to feed our children.”

Normalization

For women like Lindblom and Hinds, the fight to normalize breast-feeding isn’t so much about the benefit it will give them.

Lindblom’s days of child rearing are long past, and Hinds now works from home so it is easier to care for her children.

For them it is for the next generation.

“I do sort of feel like me breast-feeding in public will make it easier for my daughter,” she said. “I guess I’m hoping to normalize it. You have to be confident in standing up for what’s the best thing for your family. But it’s really tough when you are fighting a cultural stigma.”

One day, Hinds hopes, that a woman breast-feeding her baby in the middle of a coffee shop in Gillette will not evoke even a second glance from other customers.

Le Leche League of Campbell County

The group hosts free meetings the second Wednesday and fourth Thursday of each month.

The next meetings are at 5:30 p.m. May 23 and 3 p.m. June 12.

For more information, call 696-5419.

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