

She was branded 'a bitch who needs kicking' by online trolls

**I** HE exhausted, teary new mother in my North London surgery was in bits. It was her six-week check and the 32-year-old lawyer, who'd had a textbook-perfect pregnancy and birth, was utterly wringing out.

Of course, this is fairly normal. But things started to unravel when I asked her a routine question about her daughter's appetite. There was a pause, and her eyes welled up. 'I'm sorry, Dr Cannon, I'm not breastfeeding, she blurted, dissolving into tears.'

I gave her a smile and reassured her there was nothing whatsoever to feel guilty about. Especially as she'd found trying – and she did try – a painful, miserable and ultimately unproductive experience. Her baby was bursting with ruddy health, but mother was racked with guilt.

She left buoyed by my insistence that formula milk was giving her daughter perfectly good nutrition – but I was internally fuming. Mainly because I have appointments like this all the time.

Why do these intelligent mothers feel obliged to apologise? It is so unjust. Just as breastfeeding mums shouldn't have to apologise for feeding in public, bottle-feeding mothers should not feel they ever need to hide away, like second-class citizens.

But sadly, the medically justified promotion of breastfeeding as a healthy option has become skewed and misinterpreted, to the point where mothers who don't are admonished, pilloried and even penalised.

For instance, you don't get supermarket loyalty points on formula milk as EU law prohibits the 'promotion' of bottle-feeding. This doesn't support breastfeeding mothers, it only victimises those who can't. You can incidentally get loyalty points on processed food that could make your children obese.

Parents are now banned from taking bottles into many post-natal wards in another misguided bid to promote breastfeeding: a dad I know recently described how, like a criminal, he crept into the ward at night to visit his wife with a contraband bottle to feed their newborn. On their first day as parents, they were made to feel like criminals.

I recognise breastfeeding rates in Britain are not high and could be better but this is not the way to improve things. And if it is a woman's choice not to breastfeed, once presented with the facts, surely these types of measures are simply pejorative.

The pro-breastfeeding lobby, which I completely support in general, seems to be increasingly populated by women who feel ALL mothers should breastfeed, and that anyone who doesn't is not trying hard enough, and letting the side down.

I have felt the wrath of these zealots – not when I had my own two children, Lottie, ten, and Jude, six (who, incidentally, I breastfed) – but when I wrote about a related subject in this newspaper in 2012. At the time, I was reacting to an infamous Time Magazine cover that featured a beautiful woman breastfeeding her three-year-old – and the article inside about Dr Bill Sears, the

# HOW I WAS

# hounded by

# the 'Breastapo'

## ...and why we MUST stop bashing mums who choose the bottle

By Dr Ellie Cannon

American 'attachment parenting' guru who believes parents and children should sleep in the same bed, babies should be constantly carried in slings and mothers should breastfeed until the child wants to stop.

I simply pointed out that there is little or no evidence that there is any health benefit from these practices. I also noted that breastfeeding a child until school age – which isn't the norm in the Western world – is probably more about the emotional needs of the mother, not the child.

The reaction from 'The Breastapo', as they are nicknamed, was extreme. A Facebook page was set up in protest, and if you Google the topic you can still see the letter they wrote to the General Medical Council (GMC) demanding I be struck off. On pro-breastfeeding blog 'Lactivist', I was called a 'dumb bitch'. Another poster

said I needed 'a kicking'. It shook me. One post suggested that women who chose a career over motherhood were suffering a personality disorder. Most of them claimed I was completely misinformed.

In the GMC letter – which the regulatory body quite rightly dismissed – the writer claimed I gave no consideration to the additional health benefits for mothers who breastfeed for longer than 12 months. These include reduced rates of hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, and

cardiovascular disease as well as breast cancer. But these studies are either small and fairly inconclusive, or do not show the reverse – that bottle-feeding mothers are more likely to suffer these diseases.

Half-truths peddled by pressure groups only go to further the idea that women who aren't breastfeeding are somehow not giving their children the best start in life.

Taking all other factors out of the equation (ie the mother), and simply looking at it as breast milk versus

### Breastfeed a three-year-old?

That's just selfish and wrong

**R** Dr Ellie Cannon, a leading expert on breastfeeding, has written a letter to the GMC demanding she be struck off for writing an article in which she pointed out that there is little or no evidence that there is any health benefit from these practices. I also noted that breastfeeding a child until school age – which isn't the norm in the Western world – is probably more about the emotional needs of the mother, not the child. The reaction from 'The Breastapo', as they are nicknamed, was extreme. A Facebook page was set up in protest, and if you Google the topic you can still see the letter they wrote to the GMC demanding I be struck off. On pro-breastfeeding blog 'Lactivist', I was called a 'dumb bitch'. Another poster said I needed 'a kicking'. It shook me. One post suggested that women who chose a career over motherhood were suffering a personality disorder. Most of them claimed I was completely misinformed. In the GMC letter – which the regulatory body quite rightly dismissed – the writer claimed I gave no consideration to the additional health benefits for mothers who breastfeed for longer than 12 months. These include reduced rates of hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, and cardiovascular disease as well as breast cancer. But these studies are either small and fairly inconclusive, or do not show the reverse – that bottle-feeding mothers are more likely to suffer these diseases. Half-truths peddled by pressure groups only go to further the idea that women who aren't breastfeeding are somehow not giving their children the best start in life. Taking all other factors out of the equation (ie the mother), and simply looking at it as breast milk versus

**SPARKED OUTRAGE:** Dr Ellie's Mos article was attacked online by the 'breast is best' brigade



Trust your maternal instinct and you'll be fantastic

**I** AM a Cambridge-educated doctor who trusts science. I don't believe in ghosts or cellulite cream, and I am sceptical about stick-thin women who claim they eat chips. But I do believe in maternal instinct. Scientists can't quantify it. But it is present deep inside every mother.

There are so many rules of parenting, most of them drive. There aren't always exact answers. You have the instinct to bring up your baby – all you need to do is trust it. This is why my new guide, *Keep Calm: The New Mum's Manual*, out next week, isn't about babies. It's about how

you can learn to be a confident, happy mother. When I became a mother aged 26, I'd gone to antenatal classes and read all the books. But, shockingly for me, when Lottie arrived I lost my self-belief. I was confused and exhausted. My baby didn't follow by-the-book routines. I stressed about

the silliest things – half an ounce of milk left in the bottle... what damage I may have done by giving her pear, not apple as her first fruit... Working in general practice, I found a huge number of mothers felt the same. So I made it my mission to tell them to

trust themselves. Keep calm, and listen to the baby expert: YOU. This extends to dads too. With second children, it's easier, as parents have experience. I want to give new mums the confidence from day one that they will do a fantastic job. If you have this attitude, you will.

● *Keep Calm: The New Mum's Manual*, by Dr Ellie Cannon, is published on March 6 by Vermilion, £10.99. To order your copy at the special price of £8.99 with free p&p, call the Mail Book Shop on 0844 472 4157 or go to mailbookshop.co.uk.

who hate her

views. But our GP insists breast ISN'T always best



L&R / NICOLE KERR / DEBENHAMS / SOPHIE OLIVER / MAC

**PICTURE OF HEALTH:** Dr Ellie with daughter Lottie, ten, and son Jude, six

## Don't panic, Mum! Other top tips from Dr Ellie's manual

### Sleepless nights won't last

IN THE first five or six weeks of your baby's life, but possibly even the first three months, sleepless nights are a fact of life and, quite frankly, you just have to accept that. I'm not in the business of making false promises and that's the harsh reality. Babies are not born knowing the difference between night and day, and they need feeding every two to three hours.

Being pragmatic about sleeplessness and learning to cope with short-term tiredness means you will keep calm and enjoy your baby. Remember, this is not for ever.

Of course, there will be some snugg mummy in your antenatal group with a robot baby who sleeps for eight-hour stretches. Well, I promise, she is the anomaly, not you. Sleep-deprivation is like being run

### Discover your own routine

**ROUTINE** is another word like penneum, dilate, and poo that you never use before you are pregnant, and then once the baby pops out, it feels as if you say it all the time.

The big question every mum wants to know is, do you need a routine for your baby?

The answer is, there are no rules. Routine means sticking to the same times each day for feeds, sleeps and activities. Like any timetable, it gives you some way to help you plan. But some people don't want rigid structure and a lot of women feel the routine ends up controlling them, which is not good. For them, feeding on demand might be preferable to a set schedule.

One of the biggest parenting secrets is that the majority of babies have their own pattern and fall into it

### So, how are YOU feeling?

NOW that you've given birth, not many people are going to be interested in how you feel.

Sorry if that sounds callous: it's simply reality. It's not that nobody cares about you any more, it's simply that your 9lb red-faced bundle is right now far more fascinating than you. Even your own mother will phone and not ask how you are.

From now on, all anyone will talk to you about is THE BABY.

But once you give birth, who you are changes massively – so it shouldn't come as a surprise that you may not be feeling as 'normal' as you were.

Except it does come as a big surprise. This isn't about saggy boobs and stretchmarks, although these are a big part of the transformation. People see you differently; you see yourself differently, and you are treated differently.

Antenatal classes might have got you up to speed with which breast pad is best, but you've probably not really contemplated that you

over by a truck. You'll feel anxious, stressed, nauseous. Many women become convinced they're seriously ill. It's a big strain on you and your other half – and you have got to come up with some strategies to handle it.

- Work in shift: if there is another adult around, you don't both need to be up with your baby.
- Do not watch your baby sleep (I have spent years doing this). It may be cute, but it is a waste of precious sleeping time.
- Grab sleep when you can – even 30 minutes is worth it. Don't go crazy with coffee to keep yourself awake because this will make you too wired to nap.
- Don't compare your baby to others – sleeping is not a competitive sport.
- Remember, this will probably be for a few weeks, and things will get better.

naturally. You can simply follow that lead. Be careful not to follow someone else's timetable as it stops you watching and learning from your own baby. If he or she always has a long sleep in the morning, follow that lead and put them down at that time.

Both my kids were evening sleepers. After six weeks with my first child, I was so confident of her routine that I got a babysitter (my dad) one evening so I could go out. Don't be envious – I went to Tesco.

Use a diary to work out sleep patterns and gradually you will have worked out your own unique baby routine. And while I would never tell a parent whether or not to put their baby into a routine, I would always suggest being consistent.

Babies like predictability – just as we adults do – and respond well to it.

might be crying every day for two weeks. In the first ten days, your mood will be all over the place.

This isn't post-natal depression, it's just fairly typical. And for most women (I think dads feel it too, but often don't admit it), it passes pretty quickly. Boredom is another normal state of mind. Feeling cheesed off, harking back to pre-baby times or wishing you were still at work does not make you a bad mother. If you feel weepy, guilty, or that you can't cope, are uninterested in your baby, miserable and feel unable to concentrate for more than two weeks, then tell your partner and see your GP together.

If you do have post-natal depression, your baby will not be taken away. It does not mean you are a bad mother. You will not necessarily have to take antidepressants, and no one will judge you. The sooner you get help, the sooner you can start getting better.

@Dr\_Ellie

## DO YOU HAVE A MEDICAL QUESTION THAT NEEDS ANSWERING?

I'll be replying in my new-look column, only in Mail on Sunday Health, starting next week. Email [DrEllie@mailonsunday.co.uk](mailto:DrEllie@mailonsunday.co.uk) or tweet @Dr\_Ellie