

# Breastfeed a Toddler Why on Earth?

Written by Jack Newman, MD, FRCPC

Thursday, 01 December 2005 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 March 2014 08:24

More and more women are now breastfeeding their babies, and many are also finding that they enjoy breastfeeding enough to want to continue longer than the usual few months they initially intended to breastfeed.

UNICEF has long encouraged breastfeeding for two years and longer, and the American Academy of Pediatrics is now on record encouraging mothers to nurse at least one year and as long after that as both mother and baby desire. Even the Canadian Paediatric Society, in its latest feeding statement, acknowledges that women may want to breastfeed for two years or longer. Breastfeeding to three and four years of age was common in much of the world until recently, and it is still common in many societies for toddlers to breastfeed.



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Perhaps, more importantly, he is more secure in his independence. He has received comfort and security from the breast until he is ready to make the step himself to discontinue breastfeeding. And when he makes that step himself, he knows he has achieved something; he knows he has moved ahead. It is a milestone in his life. If a need is met, the need goes away. If a need is unmet (such as the need to breastfeed and be close to mom), it remains a need well into the child-hood or teenage years.

Often we push children to become independent too quickly. Children are encouraged to sleep alone too soon, to wean from the breast too soon, to do without their parents too soon, to do everything too soon. The child will become independent soon enough without any pushing. What's the rush? Sooner enough they will be leaving home. Would you want your child to leave home at 14?

Of course, breastfeeding can, in some situations, be used to foster an overly dependent relationship. But the same can also be true of food and toilet training. The problem is not breastfeeding. In these situations, there are other issues at work. Possibly the most important aspect of nursing a toddler is not the nutritional or immunologic benefits, important as they are. I believe the most important aspect of nursing a toddler is the special relationship between child and mother. Breastfeeding is a life-affirming act of love. This continues when the baby becomes a toddler. Anyone without prejudices who has ever observed an older baby or toddler nursing can testify that there is something almost magical, something special, and something far beyond food going on. A toddler will sometimes spontaneously, for no obvious reason, break into laughter while he is nursing. His delight in the breast goes far beyond a source of food. And if the mother allows breast, breastfeeding becomes a source of delight for her as well, far beyond the pleasure of providing food.

If a child becomes ill or gets hurt what easier way to comfort the child than breastfeeding? I remember nights in the emergency department when mothers would walk their ill, non-nursing babies or toddlers up and down the halls trying, often unsuccessfully, to console them, while the nursing mothers were sitting quietly with their comforted, if not necessarily happy, babies at the breast. The mother comforts the sick child with breastfeeding, and the child comforts the mother by breastfeeding.

JACK NEWMAN graduated from the University of Toronto medical school as a pediatrician in 1970. He started the first hospital-based breastfeeding clinic in Canada in 1974 at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. He has been a consultant with UNICEF for the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative in Africa, and has published articles on the subject of breastfeeding in Scientific American and several medical journals. Dr. Newman has practiced as a physician in Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa.

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Why should breastfeeding continue past six months? Because mothers and babies often find breastfeeding enjoyable. Why stop an enjoyable relationship? And continued breastfeeding is even good for the health and welfare of both the mother and child.

It is said that breast milk has no value after six months. This is wrong. That anyone (including pediatricians) can say such a thing only shows how ignorant many people in our society are about breastfeeding. Breast milk is, after all, milk. Even after six months, it still contains protein, fat, and other nutritionally important and appropriate elements which babies and children need. Breast milk still contains immunologic factors that help protect the baby. In fact, some immune factors in breast milk that protect the baby against infection are present in greater amounts in the second year of life than in the first. This is, of course, as it should be, since children older than one year are generally exposed to more infection. Breast milk continues to provide factors that help the immune system to mature and help the brain, gut, and other organs to develop and mature.

It has been shown that children in daycare who are still breastfeeding have far fewer and less severe infections than the children who are not breastfeeding. The mother thus loses less time at work time if she continues nursing her baby once she is back on the job.

It is interesting that the marketing used by formula companies pushes the use of formula (a very poor copy of the real thing) for the first year of life, yet implies that breast milk (from which the copy is made) is only worthwhile for six months or even less. Too many health professionals have taken up this absurd refrain.

I have heard that the immunologic factors in breast milk prevent the baby from developing his own immunity if breastfeeding continues past six months. This is untrue; in fact, this is absurd. It is unbelievable how so many people in our society twist around the advantages of breastfeeding and turn them into disadvantages. We give babies immunizations so that they are able to defend themselves against the real infection. Breast milk also helps the baby to fight off infections. When babies fight off these infections, they become immune naturally.

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Some people fear that breastfeeding beyond the first months of life will hinder a baby's independence and continued breastfeeding makes a toddler too dependent. Don't believe it. The child who breastfeeds until he weans himself (usually between two and four years of age) is generally more independent.

Perhaps, more importantly, he is more secure in his independence. He has received comfort and security from the breast until he is ready to make the step himself to discontinue breastfeeding. And when he makes that step himself, he knows he has achieved something; he knows he has moved ahead. It is a milestone in his life. If a need is met, the need goes away. If a need is unmet (such as the need to breastfeed and be close to mom), it remains a need well into the childhood or teenage years.

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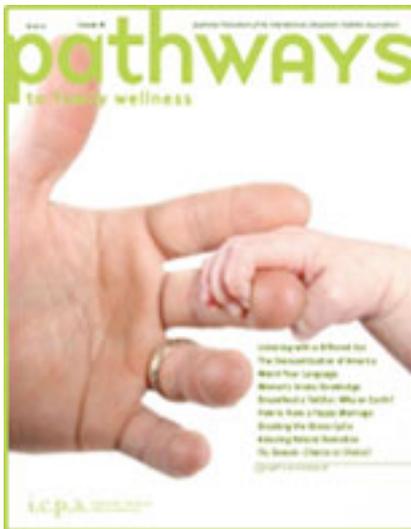
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