

The Pleasure of Extended Breastfeeding

Dr Sarah Buckley

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An expanded and updated version of this article is available in Sarah's book: *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering: The wisdom and science of gentle choices in pregnancy, birth, and parenting*. Details are available at www.sarahjbuckley.com.

My first-born, Emma, was 14 months old. I had enrolled in a course, and, with the feeling of my life opening up again, had begun to wean. It was at that time that I read a book called *Mothering Your Nursing Toddler*. Starting with the assumption that extended breastfeeding is satisfying for both mother and child, the author, Norma Jane Bumgarner writes of the security, confidence and self-esteem that we give our children when we allow them to nurse, and wean, according to their own schedule. She certainly convinced me, and Emma and I went on to nurse happily for three more years.

Re-reading the book six years later, her message seems less radical. My three keen nurslings have, to me, well proven the benefits of an extended breastfeeding relationship, with a physical resilience and emotional independence that comes, I believe, from the access to loving arms and the secure base that breastfeeding provides. Over the years I have also learned about the more tangible advantages of extended nursing. While breastfeeding is well accepted in our culture, with around 80% of babies starting out on the breast, rates drop off quickly, with 50% still feeding at 1 month and 24% at 6 months (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Breastfeeding a toddler can attract the sort of disapproval that any breastfeeding mother was subjected to a generation ago, leading some mothers to become "closet nursers".

In contrast, mothers in most traditional cultures breastfeed their babies into at least the second year, as did most mothers in Western Europe until this century (Dettwyler, 1995). Even in medieval times, the dangers of early weaning were understood, and sickly infants, twins and males were breastfed longer than the usual one to two years (Filds, 1995). The trend towards mothers working away from the home, the cult of the childrearing "expert", and the advice that a mother's own milk is less suitable for her baby than a scientific formula, have all contributed to the decline of extended breastfeeding.

There is increasingly strong evidence supporting extended breastfeeding. Katherine A. Dettwyler, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Nutrition at Texas A&M University has recently summarised the research on breastfeeding beyond 6 months, in a soon to be published paper. She notes that "In every case, regardless of the outcome health variable, the longer the child was breastfed, the better the health outcome, with the children breastfed for 18-24+ months having the lowest risk...." (Dettwyler, 1998). Professor Dettwyler lists the areas that have been studied so far, including: dental malocclusion, gastrointestinal disease, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, ear infections, childhood cancer and childhood diabetes. New studies published this year support her conclusions that breastfeeding is associated with higher IQ and school achievements in later childhood, with the benefit probably increasing with duration of nursing (Wilson et al, 1998; Horwood, LJ, 1998). Professor Dettwyler estimates, from anthropological data, that the natural age for weaning is between 4 and 6 years (Dettwyler, 1995).

Extended breastfeeding also has physical benefits for mothers, partly through the release of hormones in her body as she nurses. Prolactin, sometimes known as the mothering hormone, has been shown to have a relaxing effect on the mother and to enhance the desire for contact with her baby (Lawrence, 1989; Sobrinho, 1993). Oxytocin, which is responsible for the let-down reflex during breastfeeding, has been called the love hormone because of its relationship to orgasm, birth, breastfeeding and bonding. Both of these hormones are thought to contribute to the slow return of fertility among breastfeeding women.

Breastfeeding also releases endorphins, the body's natural opiates, for both mother and baby (Tay, 1991), underlining the pleasurable aspects for both partners in this amazing and rewarding relationship.

Whether you're making a conscious decision to extend your nursing relationship or simply haven't felt the need to wean yet, you'll get support and information from your local Nursing Mothers Group. Their Breastfeeding Helpline Numbers will be found in the phone book or online at <http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au>.

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