

# About Weaning: *Because Breastfeeding Is More Than Milk*

## **Ideally, the breastfeeding relationship will continue until the baby outgrows the need**

Breastfeeding addresses numerous needs in the baby and toddler including, but not limited to: hunger, thirst, nutrition, skin-to-skin contact, touch, eye contact, engagement, love, mother-baby bonding, comfort, security, safety, warmth, attention, connection, quiet, centering, relaxation and suckle. The need for comfort suckling or non-nutritive suckling may last for several years as witnessed by the use of bottles, thumbs and pacifiers by many toddlers and preschoolers. Each weaning is as unique as your baby or toddler and your family's circumstances. And it is for this reason that La Leche League International emphasizes that weaning should be done gradually and with love.

## **Weaning is a process that begins with the first introduction of a substance other than breast milk**

In American culture, the word "weaning" is usually associated with something we are giving up. However, weaning is not the cessation of breastfeeding, but rather the addition of other foods to the breastfeeding child. Rather than an event, weaning is a process that can last days, weeks, months or years. When we talk about breastfeeding and natural weaning, we are talking about fulfillment or satisfaction. Natural weaning occurs when your baby's need for nursing has been fulfilled.

## **The optimal approach to weaning matches the needs and requirements of the child.**

Since nursing takes care of a wide variety of needs, the most effective way to lead babies through weaning is to guess accurately what the child's current most pressing needs are and then meet those needs with something



other than nursing. The baby's father, the mother's partner, and other family members can be a great help during this time.

## **Avoid abrupt weaning whenever possible**

Abrupt weaning is the most difficult for both the mother and the baby and should be avoided if at all possible. Serious drawbacks of abrupt weaning include physical discomfort and potential health complications for the mother. Because breastfeeding is a source of comfort and closeness as well as food, an abrupt weaning may be emotionally traumatic for the baby. A planned gradual weaning is preferable because it allows a mother to slowly substitute other kinds of extra loving attention and affection to compensate for the closeness they shared while nursing. Eliminating one daily feeding every two or three days allows the mother's milk supply to decrease slowly, with little or no fullness and discomfort.

## **When abrupt weaning is recommended for medical reasons**

If a mother tells her doctor that she'd like to continue nursing or be given time to wean

gradually, alternatives can usually be found. For example, if a drug that is prescribed for a mother is found to be one of the few drugs that are incompatible with breastfeeding, the doctor may be able to substitute another drug if he knows the mother wants to continue nursing. Sometimes a recommended course of medical treatment or specific procedure can be modified or delayed. La Leche League Leaders have information on the compatibility of specific drugs with breastfeeding. Even when a mother must take a drug that is incompatible with breastfeeding, she still has the option of continuing to express her milk and returning to breastfeeding after treatment is completed.

The baby also has special needs during an abrupt weaning. The baby's doctor should be consulted about what foods to substitute for mother's milk, which may vary depending

on the baby's age. The baby will also need lots of extra holding and focused attention from loving family members. Although many mothers feel the urge to distance themselves from their babies while weaning for fear the child will insist on nursing, what a baby needs most during weaning is reassurance that he is still loved.

## **Planned Weaning of a Younger Baby**

The practical details of a planned weaning will depend upon the age of the child. Always consult your doctor about what to give your baby in place of mother's milk. For the very young baby, weaning involves finding an appropriate substitute for mother's milk and then replacing breastfeeding with bottles. If the baby is close to a year old, already eating other foods, and drinking well from a cup, a mother may be able to forgo the bottle entirely.

For the younger baby, the first concern during weaning is nutrition, since breastfeeding is first and foremost a method of feeding that also provides closeness and comfort. In order to gradually wean a young baby, substitute a



bottle for one daily feeding every two to three days. In about two weeks, the baby will be down to nursing just once or twice a day. If there is no rush to wean completely, you can continue these nursings for another week or two, or even longer. Your breasts will continue to produce enough milk for these feedings as long as your baby continues to nurse.

### Planned Weaning of an Older Baby or Toddler

The planned weaning of an older baby and toddler may require several weeks or months of concentrated time and attention to help a child wean before he is developmentally ready with a minimum of unhappiness. Here are some other suggestions that may help.

- Encourage the baby's father, the mother's partner, and other family members to play an active role in weaning.
- Minimize the child's hunger and thirst by offering regular nutritious snacks and meals.
- Anticipate nursings and offer substitutes and distractions before the child asks to nurse.
- Anticipate the child's needs and meet them in other ways.
- Change daily routines.
- Don't offer to breastfeed, but don't refuse if it's a real need for the child.

### Partial Weaning

The World Health Organization recommends that breastfeeding should continue for up to two years of age and beyond, with appropriate complementary foods from six months. So alongside introducing solid foods and a cup from about six months you can continue to breastfeed, avoiding any need to give bottles or infant formula.

Partial weaning may be an option if you are feeling overwhelmed by your child's need to breastfeed around the clock. Shortening the length of feeds or reducing their frequency may be enough to make you feel less overwhelmed. Some families find weaning their little one from night feeds relieves the pressure—other families encourage their child to feed less during the day whilst meeting his need to nurse at night. You may have become used to thinking that nursing meets your baby's every need for attention. As a child grows he will crave your focused attention as well as your presence. Just joining in enthusiastically with his play may be enough to change the pattern.

### Returning To School or Work

Breastfeeding can continue if you will be separated from your baby by school or employment outside the home. Some mothers express milk while at school or work for their baby to have next day—others simply continue nursing while at home. If you decide to wean before you return to school or work, first cut out those feeds that happen during those hours. If things don't go as planned and your child is still breastfeeding once or twice a day when you return to school or work, nursings will then be at times when you are available. Continuing to enjoy the closeness of nursing can make the periods of separation easier for both of you. It also means your child still gets antibodies through your milk for protection from any infections exposed to while at childcare or with a caretaker other than you.

### Breastfeeding or not, your baby still needs you.

Weaning will not remove your child's need for you or necessarily make you less tired. Nor will weaning from night feeds guarantee that your child will sleep from dusk till dawn. Older babies and toddlers still wake for a number of reasons—hunger, thirst, discomfort, pain, bad dreams or teething. Your child will need your attention and care for years. Providing other kinds of attention can sometimes be more tiring than simply nursing! Ending breastfeeding before your baby or toddler is ready to stop involves effort on your part. You'll need to offer substitutes and distractions in the form of nutritious food and attention. Substituting lots of this 'other mothering' can help your child come through the weaning process with his confidence and trust in you intact. If you are tired or overwhelmed, taking things slowly may be easier for both of you. Ask other family members to help.

### Watch your baby or toddler for cues.

During the time your child is weaning, stay alert for any changes in behavior. Clingy, angry, aggressive, uptight, or wakeful behavior, may be signs that weaning is going too quickly for your child. Slowing the process or perhaps abandoning it for a week or two may give your child time to adjust more easily. You could then start again when he is ready. Because some babies have a strong need to suck, they may find another outlet, such as thumb sucking, during or after weaning. Watching and observing will help you decide how weaning is affecting your child so you can make adjustments accordingly.

One benefit of a gradual, planned weaning is that the mother can be flexible when unusual situations arise. When a child is ill, for example, he may want to nurse more often for comfort. The mother can then go back to more frequent nursing until he is feeling better, knowing that weaning can always be resumed then. Be aware that the mother's milk supply may increase with increased nursing. There is no advantage to rushing weaning; it is a big change for both mother and child and it takes time to adjust to change.

One child may wean naturally at age one or two while another may be going strong at age three. Reasons one child may nurse longer than another include a strong sucking urge, a great need for closeness and body contact, or an unrecognized allergy or other physical problem. Natural weaning allows for differences in children by letting them grow at their own pace, giving up breastfeeding according to their own timetable. Only one thing is known for sure: All children eventually wean.

Although weaning itself is universal among nursing mothers and babies, every weaning is unique. The best advice for making weaning a positive celebration of growth is for the mother to listen to her heart and be sensitive to her baby's cues. Because breastfeeding is more than milk, weaning done gradually and with love—with consideration given to the feelings and preferences of both the mother and the baby—can make it the positive experience it was meant to be.

#### References:

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