



# THE LATTER STAGES OF BREASTFEEDING AND WEANING

*Janet Wilson, Papakura*

I was breastfeeding a five-year-old. I never thought I'd write that, but here we are. He has had one feed since, and a few attempts at it but breastfeeding has very quickly lost its place in his day! Now he asks, looks like he may latch on only to give me a big raspberry... not that pleasant, I've decided.

**O**f course mothers don't set out to breastfeed five year olds, but I am really glad that I have let it go on. My first child was weaned just before she was three. She is STILL not happy about that, but at the time I felt it was the only option. There were complicating factors, but in essence there are always two of you (sometimes three or more) in a breastfeeding

relationship, and it has to work for all of you – or else it doesn't work for anyone.

My intention had always been to follow a child-led weaning process. I know at least five people personally who have, or are, breastfeeding their older (than four years) children. I also remember fondly one person telling me, when I was pregnant and still at work, that she and her twin had been

breastfed almost until they went to school!

The first time I saw an older child breastfeeding was at my very first La Leche League meeting, when I was eight months into my first pregnancy. I was fascinated, and intrigued. "What, why and when" were the thoughts in my head. I now know the answer to those questions:

What? A brilliant system of comfort and

nutrition that lasts whatever distance you need it to.

Why? Why not? If it isn't broken, you don't need to \*fix\* it.

When? Whenever you need to – most Older Breastfeeding Dyads generally have agreed places, times or situations. In my experience LLL children are really tuned into a LLL meeting environment and may feed more frequently at those times... they know it is a safe place to ask.

As my journey has continued in the Breastfeeding World I remember that 'big' child, and particularly her mother and the calm, confident model that she was. I recently sent a message to the young woman that had disclosed her breastfed status to me, all those years ago, in amongst her peers. She has become a really inspiring young woman – recently shaving her very long hair, and doing really physical fundraising activities, travelling the world helping and motivating others to be the best they can be. I know that non-breastfed children also grow up to be inspiring people but I would like to draw the long bow and connect her attitude with her extended breastfed status. I want to because that is what I have in mind as a reason to continue breastfeeding my children into a biologically normal age range for breastfeeding.

I have often wondered what my breast milk tasted like. I know I could have tasted it, and I did, but it was not so exciting as to make me want to taste it hundreds and thousands of times! There must be something absolutely magical about it! So I asked Quinn. He said it tasted like warm milk... and here I was hoping for some kind of breakthrough flavour! On one occasion he did tell me that the left hand side tasted like strawberries – but he may have been eating them at roughly the same time.

"I don't prefer that side Mum, I prefer the other side." Haven't you wished, at some point, that your child could tell you why every now and again they are fussing, coming off the breast, seemingly unsatisfied with the arrangement? The benefits of having an older breastfeeding child are that they CAN! It is a matter of preference, don't you know...

The coolest thing about it all is that in Quinn's world it is completely normal to breastfeed at five years old. Or four, especially three, two and one. No one has ever challenged HIM, and for that I am relieved. It is automatic. A perfect option. A Go To

solution for comfort, snuggles, sleepy time, middle of the night reassurance, the sight of blood... Another interesting thing is that it is so normal to him, and he has friends that breastfed when they were 'older' that I reckon he assumes that everyone does it. Do I need to tell him that most children who go to school don't breastfeed?

Recently he had a tooth extracted and was in a lot of pain for the following 24 hours. The worst part of this for me was that he wasn't breastfeeding! In the past, breastfeeding soothed and healed such misery – and I missed that part of it a lot. The confidence that it would solve so many things, give him time out, give me time out, and invariably see him back Up and At 'Em within minutes of the incident never wavered. What do I do without it? Close cuddles in 'The Position' were happily accepted!

In trusting that he would wean when he needed to I believe I have learnt patience. I have learned to trust The Process. I know that when he tells me he is full, or hungry, that he actually is – he has learned to regulate his own appetite. I have observed that babies are extremely capable of telling us their needs and that if we accommodate those needs then trust and love and bonds are formed and grow. I know that he trusts

his own body, and he is encouraged to listen to it. I knew when he fell on the trampoline that his injury was very serious (broken arm), and extremely painful even though he couldn't articulate his pain – I knew because he didn't want to breastfeed – and that was unheard of!! That fact was the main one I repeated, to anyone who listened, as it was so very unusual for my boy to not breastfeed!

Now a new phase is starting. The weaning was so gradual that it literally just faded away and we are left with happy memories. Non-nursing bras are back! I can move out of a predominantly breastfeeding focused wardrobe! I will continue to be involved in breastfeeding support and advocacy.

Our family loved the ride. We will all miss one of the children breastfeeding in our midst. It is possibly my biggest investment in my children, and I am so grateful that my husband was 150% supportive of our breastfeeding lifestyle. It has led to me meeting a huge group of wonderful people who are part of the supportive fabric of breastfeeding in New Zealand, and worldwide. It has made me who I am today.

If, in later years, my children are bold enough to ask if there are any 'investments' awaiting them after my ultimate demise I will be sure to remind them that they drank it! 🍼

