

WEANING

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I have often heard the definition of weaning as 'to be satisfied' and in my experience I think this is true.

WITH MY FIRST BABY, Matthew, I was an exhausted new mother trying desperately to do everything right. He had latching trouble that even experts struggled to identify, and because of my split bleeding nipples, he spent a week drinking expressed milk from a bottle. Twelve years on I still bear the scars.

When Matthew had just turned one, we went out of town to visit family. On one occasion his cousin who had just turned five was present, and as the evening wore on, his mother took him on her lap, breastfed him, and he fell asleep.

Until then, my point of reference for nursing duration was two years, as this is what had been the norm when my mother breastfed my brother. I was not shocked, but I was surprised. And several things went through my head – one being that I wouldn't do that, quickly followed by a reminder that I probably shouldn't rule anything out.

Matthew and I enjoyed a happy breastfeeding relationship for over four years.

I became pregnant with baby number two when Matthew was thirteen months old, so embarked on a journey into nursing when pregnant and then tandem nursing.

Aidan was an enthusiastic feeder, and we experienced none of the troubles I had the first time. Tandem feeding worked well for us, as it meant that while the newborn fed, I also knew exactly where the toddler was.

When the boys were four and two years old respectively, I found I was pregnant with their sister. This time around, breastfeeding while pregnant was a bit too much. It was painful, and I decided that the boys should wean.

I discovered that weaning a four-year-old and weaning a two-year-old are quite different experiences.

When Matthew was four and a half, we exploited the idea of this 'half birthday' to bring our breastfeeding relationship to an end. We made it an event. He had a special dinner to celebrate that he was moving onto the next step.

This situation showed us that although the child didn't make the choice about weaning, he was old enough to participate and cooperate in someone else's decision about him. Breastfeeding is a relationship, and the fundamental shift in it meant something had to change, a compromise had to be reached, and an effort made for everyone to be protected. And we succeeded.

A few months later I found breastfeeding Aidan (then aged two and a half) was too painful, and I felt that he, too, would be old enough to handle weaning.

I was wrong. He became upset, toilet training regressed, and he was not a happy boy. All I could do was make the best decision I could at the time, and my levels of physical discomfort with continuing to feed him overrode his distress. I had to find ways of 'other mothering' – and fathering; this was a point where his father came into his own with comforting.

Looking back now, I do regret weaning him at that stage. During this time we moved house, and he would have had a vague knowledge that big changes were afoot with my growing belly. But I can only acknowledge that at the time I thought it was best for all of us, and use the experience to learn from.

In October 2006 we welcomed our first baby girl, Fiona. Breastfeeding went smoothly and she enjoyed it for many years.

In 2008 we found we were expecting another baby in February 2009, and so embarked yet again on a tandem feeding journey. Breastfeeding while pregnant was fine, and tandem nursing turned out to be a real bonus.

Joel had lots of problems latching, and would simply drink milk from my initial letdown, and then fall asleep. He would take in adequate quantities of milk to keep hydrated, but not enough to put on weight.

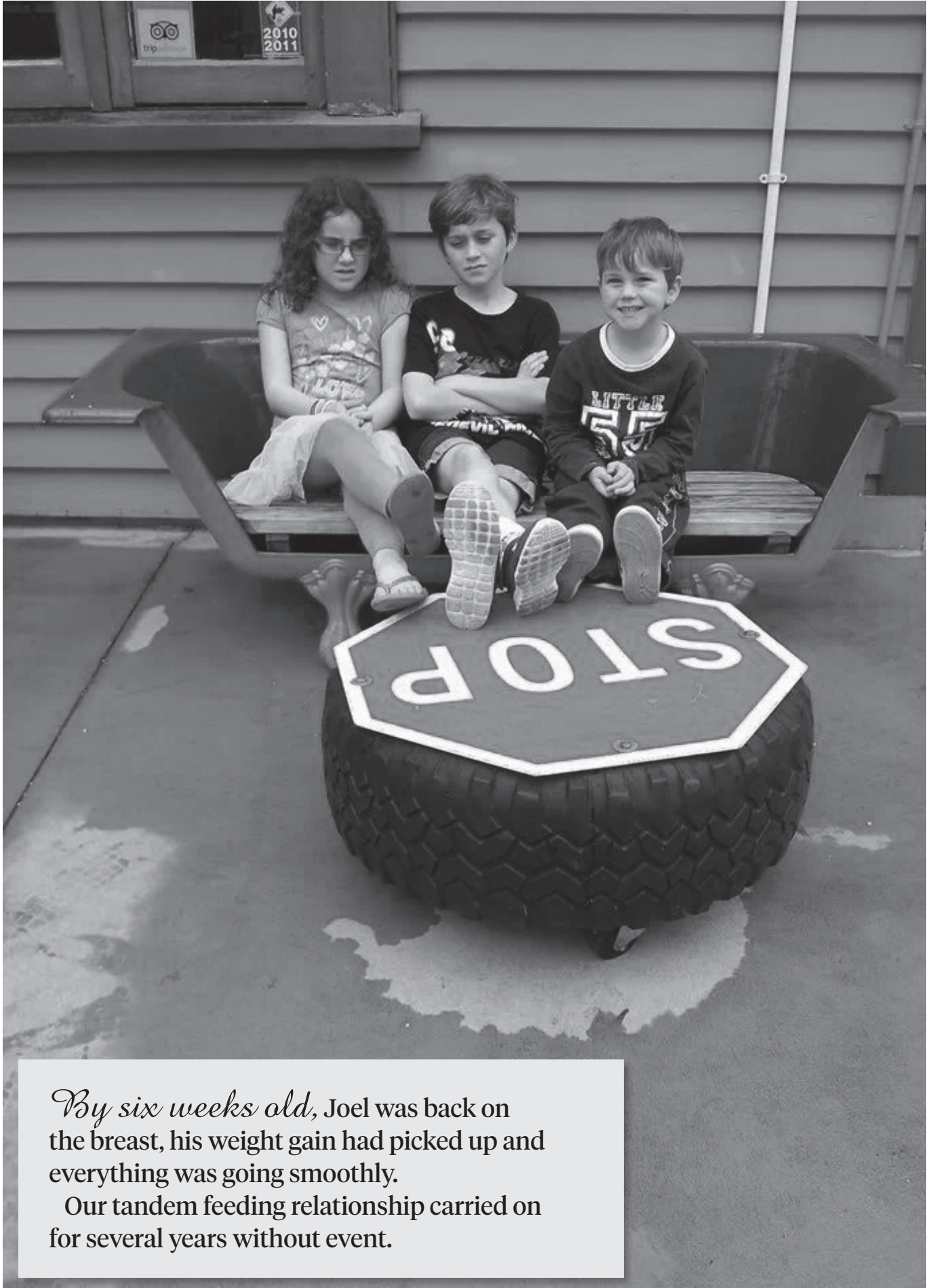
Days and weeks of stress blurred together as we tried all sorts of techniques to get volumes of milk into him, and to get him feeding at the breast again. The real bonus in all this was that Fiona (two) was still an enthusiastic feeder, and she aided in keeping my supply up. Even through the fraught early days with Joel, it was comforting to be able to nurse her to sleep in the middle of the day.

By six weeks old, Joel was back on the breast, his weight gain had picked up and everything was going smoothly.

Our tandem feeding relationship carried on for several years without event.

In 2010 we were approached by the makers of the TV series 20/20 to participate in a piece about 'extended' breastfeeding. Knowing that features about extended breastfeeding often lurch into sensationalism, it was a risky move. But the producer and presenter were reassuring, pleasant, polite and non-judgemental. We spent several days having our family filmed and I did an interview to camera. At the time Fiona

Fiona (six) Aidan (ten) and Joel (four)



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Our tandem feeding relationship carried on for several years without event.

Breastfeeding started out as a momentous event. Something that took over our lives and our time and our minds, but eleven years later as that time came to an end, it was just a quiet slipping away. A need now sated and an emotional belly now full.

was three-and-a-half and I talked about her weaning in about a year. Of course this again came back to my own cultural references. I had pushed past my original social norm of two years old, and created my own.

Time passed and breastfeeding changed with age and stage. As our children grew we changed our approach. At around two years old I stopped breastfeeding them to sleep and co-sleeping, and we initiated 'Daddy Intervention.' This was an approach to get them to fall asleep in their beds, and Daddy would be the one to return them there if they woke in the night. They were still welcome to breastfeed during the day, and there is still nothing like a breastfeed to calm a busy toddler and get them to sleep.

In 2012 Fiona turned five and started school – and was still breastfeeding first thing in the morning. This carried on for another year. She and Joel were still both breastfeeding, coming in for morning cuddles and 'milkies' every day.

In January 2013 we moved house, and found that the dynamics of the household changed with the layout of the house. Our formerly cramped existence had meant more closeness, and our new spacious house lent itself to children heading downstairs and away from their parents' room.

Eventually, the littler ones followed suit, and not long after turning six, sometime into the new year, Fiona stopped coming in for her morning milkies, instead choosing to join her big brothers downstairs watching TV.

After having experience with a child who had truly weaned by her own choice, I came to understand the meaning behind

weaning and why it meant satisfaction. We had both let ourselves run through the natural course of breastfeeding, and at the end, that course came to a natural close with no feelings of loss or resentment.

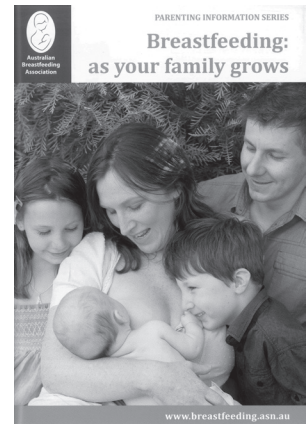
Not long after, at the age of four, Joel also began to follow his big brothers downstairs, and he didn't come calling for his morning milk either.

Initially I was surprised at this. My reference for normal nursing duration had been pushed out so far that it was almost a little jarring to have a child wean 'so soon' – at four years old!

Weaning Joel was a time of reflection. I felt I had fulfilled this part of my parenting journey well. I did have some regrets, but overall had done the right thing. And that wasn't dictated by books or other people – it was by watching my child in the context of his family group and his needs.

Breastfeeding started out as a momentous event. Something that took over our lives and our time and our minds, but eleven years later as that time came to an end, it was just a quiet slipping away. A need now sated and an emotional belly now full.

It was satisfaction. ♥



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