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I am a mother of two children, both of whom I have breastfed successfully. I breastfed my first child until he voluntarily ceased breastfeeding at 2 and five months, when I was eight months pregnant. I am still breastfeeding my second son who is almost 19 months old and plan to do so until he self-weans.

I found breastfeeding to be a learned art and it has taken perservance on my part, and support for me to do it. I come from a family background that supports breastfeeding (my mother, mother-in-law and two sisters breastfed before me), and was not attracted to breastmilk substitutes, despite their promotion and prevalence in the community.

Despite coming from a family that was pro-breastfeeding my information base about breastfeeding was very poor. I knew that it was good for them and me and that it would be the least costly option. I assumed it would be easy to do and comfortable from the start which was a false assumption. I had little understanding of the mechanics of breastfeeding and had absolutely no idea how much time it would take out of each day to do it. I didn't know that a newborn baby might feed for 12 out of 24 hours (or longer); that evenings and nights would be peak feeding times, and that my child's need for feeds would fluctuate - eg would go up dramatically in times of growth or illness. In short, I had little idea that breastfeeding, like becoming a mum, would alter my life dramatically. Even after breastfeeding six children my mother, who breastfed in an era of timed feeding, did not realise that breastmilk is made in response to the sucking of the baby, ie that it is important to feed a baby when they demonstrate they are hungry and impossible not to produce enough of it, when the baby is given the opportunity to suckle. Basic information like this is lacking in our society, particularly as we generally don't live in extended families with infants breastfeeding in front of us as often as we see people drinking coffee in cafes.

These are the factors that have influenced my breastfeeding success:

- It mattered that neither I nor my sons had drugs or interventions during childbirth – we birthed naturally and quickly at home in the comfort of our own environment. I was free to bring each baby to the breast immediately after birth establishing early breastfeeding and precipitating natural birth of each child's placenta. In each case I was under the care of highly skilled midwives whom I trusted and liked. My midwives were able to give me practical support in establishing breastfeeding in the initial post-partum period.
- It mattered that I have a supportive partner who brings me glasses of water to keep me hydrated while breastfeeding, cooks dinner while I breastfed, got me pillows to support my comfort, and that of our sons when they were small and starting out at breastfeeding; he cleaned the kitchen while I breastfed in the evening, took me to the doctor when I had mastitus and accompanied me and our son to the Child Health clinic for check ups, and helped care for our toddler when our second son was born. He brought our first son into my

- workplace at lunchtime on the days I worked so that our son could have a middle of the day feed. I could not have breastfed without my sons having an active and involved father.
- It mattered that as older parents (and we are middle class people) who have established careers and accumulated savings and assets I was not under pressure to return to work early in my sons lives or work full time.
  - It matter that I had a supportive workplace to return to after maternity leave and was able to negotiate 12 months leave. I was able to return to work part time (two days week) and I gave 100% commitment to my job. I had access to flex-i-time and my colleagues were positive about me feeding my son in the lunchroom (in fact, they looked forward to seeing him and were sad when he and his dad no longer visited for feeds). On the days when I was not at work my son made up for lost time, breastfeeding more often and enjoying our days together. Before this stage happened, I had no idea that in a mature child who is also eating solids the breastfeeding relationship can be maintained even with periods of separation from the mother and I did not need to use breastpumps or artificial milk substitutes at all.
  - It mattered that I am educated and seek information and support from a wide range of sources. I read books on breastfeeding whilst I was in the establishment phase and particularly when I experienced problems (two bouts of mastitis). I joined the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) early in my son's life which provided me with an annual subscription to *Essence* a high quality information packed read (which seemed to always deal with issues that were questions in my own head). I could access the support of ABA through attending meetings with other members or ring ABA counsellors day or night. It was from my first ABA group leader that I received the most constructive, empowering and confidence-boosting advice on dealing with mastitis and concerns about the weight of my six week old son. This was in stark contrast to the confidence-shaking approach of my local (free government funded) Child and Youth health clinic.
  - It mattered that as a older mum with life experience and more developed self-esteem I haven't been put off by negative looks and comments about breastfeeding directed at either me or my sons eg 'What a Guts!' and 'Aren't you ready to give that up yet?'. I have been able to resist comments such as 'You will be less exhausted when you give breastfeeding up' (how about when I get enough sleep, someone else cleans or cooks for the household – there are other things to improve my life or give up besides breastfeeding, that are far less important tasks for me to be doing) and 'No child ever weans voluntarily, you have to decide when that happens' (said to me by a 70 year old mother of four adult sons who had parents and a husband who were GPs). I found out for myself that she was wrong, he did wean, of his own accord, without stress for either of us.
  - It mattered that I didn't get too hung up on when and whether my sons would sleep through the night (my first son did at two years, my second son isn't doing too badly some of the time. I was able to accept the simple fact that babies have small stomachs and need to feed often and sometimes look to caregivers for reassurance in the night. This did impact on my life however, and makes it difficult to do much thinking work in the daytime, during a child's first twelve months or so, was my experience.

Breastfeeding is a very time consuming activity - a fact I was very poorly prepared for before having my children. I believe that breastfeeding is the primary job of mothers of infant children. When breastfeeding, I am actually doing something very important, for myself, my sons and the community - it is not pure indulgence on my part. It would make a big difference if the work of nurturing children was appropriately esteemed and supported. I strongly believe that the way that most Australian families live their lives, in nuclear families (with one or maybe two active parents if lucky) is not supportive of good parenting and is way short of what children need. I

believe that most parents (mother and father) are too stretched in terms of their workloads and that it indeed takes a village to raise a child. We should have far greater support to do the important work of nurturing young children and kudos for it, it is a great investment for the whole of our community.

I believe there is a lot that could be done to promote breastfeeding as normal. Breastfeeding has well-known health benefits for both infants and mothers. Currently, too many mothers are opting for breastmilk substitutes due to lack of support for breastfeeding and marketing of products as if they are equivalent to breastmilk and will save time and effort. While it is definitely the case that the mother is more easily substituted in the feeding process with breastmilk substitutes she and her child are being robbed of a beautiful experience for establishing closeness when this happens. It has detrimental consequences for mothers and children and is costly for the family and the community as a whole.

I have continued to be in awe of the work of the ABA and the important support to mothers in a culture where mothers and young children are often quite isolated and mothers are often feeling unsure of themselves. I have become involved in my local ABA group as a way of meeting people in my new community. The key difference I experienced better ABA advice from that of other supposed support services for new parents is that it is non-judgemental and validates a mother's goodness and ability to do what is right for her child.

The main areas where breastfeeding should be better supported are:

- Decreasing rates of birth interventions and traumas (largely through proven model of continuity of care model by a known midwife - one which has confidence in the mother and child to birth well and respects the mothers wishes during birth)
- Up to date information about breastfeeding and positive support coming from health practitioners – eg infant health nurses, GPs, midwives and obstreicians. They could learn a lot from the approach of volunteer organisations such as the ABA in this regard.
- A universal maternity payment for mothers which provides full-time income support for 24 months. In fact I would like to see both parents able to do the important work of parenting full-time in the first two years if they choose because there is certainly enough work for two people in caring for children and both a mother and a father have a right to establish a close loving connection with their children without economic burdens. Too many mothers and fathers are chronically exhausted and are making impossible choices between work and family with family often losing because of the power imbalance at work. The effects on health, well-being and development of our children and our adults is a hidden cost of current lifestyles.

I hope that by describing my own path to successful breastfeeding, I have shown the multiplicity of factors affecting current day mothers decisions whether to breastfeed or not. I think all mothers and babies in Australia deserve to breastfeed – not just the more economically advantaged, such as myself. I think we should be aiming for 100% breastfeeding rates for the first six months with extended breastfeeding for two years or beyond as the norm. Once established, breastfeeding is immensely pleasurable for both mother and child and helps us to establish life-long loving, relationships. I believe that information about the benefits of breastfeeding to mother and child is available, and will be heard. What is lacking is practical support to do it – including financial support and help meeting other family work obligations.

Yours sincerely

Bernadette Anderson