

Starting with feeding and ending with weaning -- everyone has an opinion.

Written by The Conversation

With a chuckle an old school friend of mine confessed that when he was a teenager he would try to destroy his best mate's chances with the chicks by casually slipping this statement into conversation as soon as his friend was out of earshot.

Um ... you know he was breast fed until he was eight?

Unsurprisingly, there weren't too many girls that hung around long enough to determine the sincerity (or not) of this helpful little factoid.

As I begin to think about weaning baby Joe I continue to be amazed at the diversity of opinions, emotions and physical barriers associated with breastfeeding.

I am not talking about the [issue of baring a boob in public](#) . I am talking about the anguish, the inconceivable amount of time and even the agony that can be attributed to a woman's attempt to feed their baby.

I think it is fair to say that most expecting parents have a general appreciation that a natural birth (as opposed to a cesarean delivery under anaesthesia) is going hurt. Many mothers experience anxiety about this while others see it as an important right of passage.

In contrast the physical, emotional and logistical difficulties associated with breastfeeding are rarely mentioned.

What they don't tell you

Against the epic pain of childbirth, the moment when a mother breastfeeds her baby for the first time is generally portrayed as a blissful serene moment of love and bonding between mother and child.

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What nobody tells you is that this moment will likely involve a nurse you have never met before grabbing your boob in one hand and the baby's head in the other while outlining what you must — or must not — do when breast feeding your baby.

A few hours later it all happens again with a new nurse and a new and often directly contradictory set of instructions. By day two or three the entire process can be extremely painful.

If you happen to mention the pain you are told that if it hurts you are doing it wrong. Which is the last thing any sleep deprived new mother wants to hear.

Of course, then there are those that have such difficulties either producing enough milk or getting the baby "to latch on" with sufficient strength that the baby is unable to drink the necessary volume of milk.

I have endless sympathy for the many women in this position who have to make the decision about whether or not to "top-up" or switch over entirely to formula.

If things aren't hard enough, you are provided with a reminder on every related advertisement or container of formula that *"breastfeeding is best"*. I feel like this statement should be accompanied by the disclaimer *"unless your child is starving due to zero or insufficient access to breast milk"*

As a mother it makes me sad that breastfeeding leaves so many women dealing with varying degrees of confusion and inadequacy. As a scientist I just can't get my head around how evolution got us to this point.

Beyond, conception and delivery, it's hard to think of an activity more critical to the survival of our species. Despite such acute selection pressure it seems to me that the most common experience among my own friends is that it is hard for both mum and bub to get the hang of — with many never able to satisfy their baby exclusively by breastfeeding.

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As an aside, I have also always been a little bemused that contrasting the endless promotion of all things natural in the food, clothes and toys of children, mothers appear to value the opposite when selecting formula. I guess if mothers aren't breastfeeding then they want to be reassured that they are getting the best that science can offer if names like "S-26" and "Aptimal Gold" are any indication.

To wean or not to wean

Now that little Joe is approaching six months I am nearing the minimum age that you are generally [recommended to continue breastfeeding](#) . Outside this six month guideline, public opinion seems to take over.

On the one hand you are commended for every additional month of breastfeeding you are able to "achieve" yet at the same time there is clearly a point at which a child is viewed as too old to continue breastfeeding.

The problem is that there is variability in both the individual circumstances of the mother and the opinions held by everyone from health care providers to total strangers. So in the end it is hard to avoid the message that whatever you are doing is NOT the [best thing for your baby](#) .

Of course if you are attempting to return to work, you can feel like you need a degree in logistics to cope with the endless cycle of expressing, storing, freezing and dumping required to ensure that there is always enough milk available for the baby. For me there definitely reaches a point when it simply becomes unmanageable.

So while I am happy that I was able to breastfeed all of my kids, I am not too disappointed that it is coming to an end.

Bring on the solids!!!

Olivia Carter does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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