

Breastfeeding Does Space Babies and It Does So Much More

Years ago mothers knew that breastfeeding had an impact on their fertility. Why? Because there was an absence of menstruation with frequent breastfeeding. Then along came bottles and pacifiers, strict schedules, babysitters, and this knowledge was lost to the general public. Sadly, today the advice is: Don't count on breastfeeding for birth control.

Most parents are aware that breastfeeding has benefits for both mother and baby but probably would not be able to list some of those benefits. Scientists have shown how breastfeeding can improve a child's educational experience and also his mental health. The latest research now stresses the beneficial effect that breastfeeding can have upon the environment.

The spacing of births

In the mid-60s, I belonged to a La Leche League group whose teaching manual, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* (1963), stated: "Only a fraction of 1 per cent of women are likely to conceive while wholly breastfeeding before having any periods." The La Leche League definition of "wholly breastfeeding" was no solids or supplements, and under this program the periods would likely not return for 7 to 15 months. Local mothers in our Santa Clara/San Jose group experienced different times when menstruation returned, even while wholly or totally breastfeeding or today what is called exclusive breastfeeding. Why the difference? A close friend encouraged me to do the research. I did and it resulted in a personally published book on *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* (1969) which was later published by Harper & Row (1974) and Penguin (1975).

In doing the research, it soon became obvious that the frequent suckling of the baby at the breast was the primary factor in maintaining breastfeeding infertility. It is now clear that when a mother provides 1) all of her baby's nourishment at her breasts and 2) the greater part of his other suckling needs at her breasts, she will likely experience a lengthy postpartum amenorrhea (the absence of menstruation). This discovery reminded me of a teacher in the mid-50s who stressed in her high school physiology course that the reproductive cycle begins with pregnancy and ends not with childbirth but with breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding was more the accepted norm prior to 1920. After 1920 involved more mothers were using bottles and early solids. My husband and I, born in 1930 and 1939, were not breastfed. Currently, few mothers nurse for a considerable length of time and the artificial feeding of infants is a common practice.

The research papers I found are at NFPandmore.org. The following is a sample. In 1895 Dr. Leonard Remfry found a 6% pregnancy rate before the first period among breastfeeding mothers in London. In 1969, Drs. Bonte and van Balem found a similar rate of 5.4% in Rwanda. In 1971 Dr. Konald Prem of the University of Minnesota found the same results of 5% among American breastfeeding mothers.

1946, Dr. Paul Topkins: Ovulation is suppressed during lactation and the inhibition of ovarian activity is complete when menstruation is absent.

1950, Dr. Isadore Udesky: During lactation and the absence of menstruation, the suppression of

the ovarian function is almost complete.

1953, Nurse Rose Gioiosa: Breastfeeding is a natural means of spacing children when the mother nurses for 9 months or more without the use of bottles and waits for 6 months before starting solids.

1954, McKeown and Gibson: The reappearance of the menstruation is due to a reduction in suckling.

1958, American Medical Association: Complete breastfeeding in the early months of life is a fairly effective method of suppressing ovarian function and conception.

1961, Dr. Christopher Tietze of The Population Council: Prolonged absence of menstruation delays conception among nursing mothers due to the suppression of ovulation.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Otto Schaefer became known as a great advocate of breastfeeding for natural child spacing in this work with Canadian Eskimos. This population had small families of 3-4 children due to traditional breastfeeding. That changed with the introduction of trading posts where others were exposed to the baby bottle. In fact, Schaefer found that the closer the mothers lived to the trading posts, the closer they had their babies. The traditional breastfeeding mothers conceived 20-30 months after childbirth. The younger mothers under 30 years of age who bottle-fed conceived 2 to 4 months after childbirth. (Drs. Hildes and Schaefer). The natural spacing of breastfeeding was lost due to the bottle and shortened lactation.

In 1976, Dr. Peter Howie made calculations in developing countries. It was determined that breastfeeding offered 4-8 months of *additional* infertility and “31.5 million couples would not have a conception because of breastfeeding in a single year.” He stated that breastfeeding provided more pregnancy avoidance than all the unnatural forms of birth control (condoms, IUDs, pills, etc.) together which was estimated at 24 million couple-years of fertility protection at that time.

In 1976, Dr. Robert Short wrote: “Throughout the world as a whole, more births are prevented by lactation than all other forms of contraception put together.”

Since much of the research was done with non-American mothers, my published research was with American mothers. A survey was inserted at the back of the 1969 edition of *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*. These surveys showed that American mothers practicing ecological breastfeeding averaged 14.6 months of amenorrhea (1971).

The survey was also published in the Harper & Row editions, and during a 15-year period (between 1971 and 1986) we accumulated over 1500 breastfeeding surveys. With a much larger number of breastfeeding experiences and using the same criteria as in 1971, we found almost identical results. Mothers using Ecological Breastfeeding experienced 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea.

Why is the duration of breastfeeding amenorrhea so much longer with Ecological Breastfeeding than with other recognized forms of breastfeeding? The reason is the practice of frequent nursing. Ecological Breastfeeding entails a frequent nursing pattern called the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding as follows:

1. Breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of life; don't use other liquids and solids, not even water.
2. Pacify or comfort your baby at your breasts.
3. Don't use bottles and don't use pacifiers.
4. Sleep with your baby for night feedings.
5. Sleep with your baby for a daily-nap feeding.
6. Nurse frequently day and night, and avoid schedules.
7. Avoid any practice that restricts nursing or separates you from your baby.

Once solids are gradually introduced, the mother continues with frequent and unrestricted nursing. Thus she continues to use the other Six Standards.

Ecological Breastfeeding must be distinguished from cultural nursing which has no strong influence on delaying ovulation or menstruation after childbirth. With the typical American pattern of restricted nursing, fertility returns quite quickly—frequently just as quickly as for the non-nursing mother. If no form of birth regulation is used except Ecological Breastfeeding, babies on the average will be born about two to three years apart. As one mother recently told us: “Ecological breastfeeding has worked SO WELL for us that we have not needed to abstain. We are expecting our 3rd child, and all our children are naturally spaced almost 2.5 years apart!” (emphasis in original).

Breastfeeding has more to offer.

Ecological Breastfeeding maximizes the significant benefits of breastfeeding in general. Based on statements of The American Academy of Pediatrics, The American Academy of Family Physicians, and the U. S. Breastfeeding Committee, breastfeeding reduces the incidence of the following diseases for the baby: allergies, asthma, autoimmune thyroid disease, bacterial meningitis, botulism, Crohn's disease, diarrhea, ear infections, eczema, gastroenteritis, inflammatory bowel disease, leukemia, lymphoma, multiple sclerosis, necrotizing enterocolitis, obesity, respiratory tract infections, sudden infant death syndrome, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, ulcerative colitis, and urinary tract infections.

The breastfed baby also enjoys some general benefits. Compared with non-breastfed infants, the breastfed child has fewer hospital visits as premature babies, a more mature infant intestinal tract, a better immune system and a better response to vaccinations, fewer sick days, higher scores on visual acuity tests, and higher scores on cognitive and IQ tests at school age.

Breastfeeding mothers enjoy a number of dose-related benefits: decreased risks of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, anemia, rheumatoid arthritis, endometrial cancer, thyroid cancer, lupus, osteoporosis and heart disease.

The Environment

On October 2, 2019, the *British Medical Journal* startled readers with this headline: “**Support for breastfeeding is an environmental imperative.**” The BMJ report described the environmental hazards of manufacturing baby formulas and then described some of the health benefits of “exclusive breastfeeding” (nothing but mother’s milk) for the first six months. In this study, the researchers showed that helping mothers in the UK alone to exclusively breastfeed

their babies for six months “would reduce carbon emissions equivalent to reducing road traffic by 50,000 to 77,500 cars each year.” I don’t recall seeing any comment on this in other publications.

While breastfeeding-in-general is obviously the “green” way of caring for your babies, Ecological Breastfeeding is the greenest. No bottles, no formulas, no commercial baby foods, no pacifiers, and even no feminine hygiene products for 14 to 15 months on average.

Ecological Breastfeeding also provides a mother-baby closeness that is the best social environment for babies. In the spring of 1997 new studies reported that problem solving skills and reasoning are largely established by age one and that the single most important predictor of later intelligence, school success and social competence was based on the number of words an infant hears each day from an **“attentive, engaged person.”** That person would naturally be the mother, and breastfeeding provides that one “attentive, engaged person.”

The 1997 discussion centered on the importance of the first three years of life and especially the first year of life when the infant’s brain is growing at a tremendous rate. Breastfeeding is also the best nutrition for nourishing the infant’s brain.

As a result of this research, *Newsweek* published a 1997 Spring-Summer issue in which the entire magazine was devoted to the “critical first three years of life.” This special edition stated that breastfeeding and the physical reassurances such as cuddling and rocking stimulate brain growth and show a baby that he is loved and valued.

In *The War Against the Family*, William Gairdner states how we can have healthy individuals in our society. In his opinion, the kind of care needed for healthy individuals depends on **the mother providing a care that is uninterrupted, intimate, and continuous for her child during the early months and early years.** This kind of care is almost always provided to each child if his mother breastfeeds him as nature intended.

In *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 29, 1997, a mother expressed her fears of staying home alone as a child because her mother worked. She had no one to show an interest in her as a child and to be a champion for her when she needed one. In her eyes, mothering is “the most important job. . . that literally saves lives.” As she said, “I would live in a dirt shack before I would not be there for my kids.”

Maria Montessori in *The Absorbent Mind* (first published in the U. S. in 1967) promotes prolonged lactation of 1.5 to 3 years because it keeps mother and baby together. “The baby accompanies his mother wherever she goes. Mother and child are inseparable... Except where civilization has broken down this custom, no mother ever entrusts her child to someone else.”

In her most recent book, *Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters* (2017), Erica Komisar reaffirms the importance of the mother-baby togetherness. This book can be valuable for both working and stay-at-home mothers.

Interestingly, on a side issue Erica Komisar states the benefits of sleeping with your baby. In many areas, mothers are told at the hospital after birth: “You know that you must never sleep with your baby.” In my book, *The Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding*, I offer 20 reasons for sleeping with your baby, assuming safe-sleeping standards. Extended breastfeeding amenorrhea would be the 21st reason.

Ecological Breastfeeding is an excellent option for spacing the births of our children. Breastfeeding provides many health benefits to both mother and baby and is good for the environment. There is profound ignorance about these realities. Well educated adult students of our Home Study course in Natural Family Planning regularly comment on how little they knew previously and how much they learned. This message regarding the many benefits of breastfeeding needs to be taught in our schools and churches.

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