

## It Works Too Well

*(Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing, 1999, pages 185-189)*

While many couples enjoy a long period of breastfeeding amenorrhea and infertility, it may become a source of frustration when the couple desires another baby. The nursing mother may try to eliminate a feeding or reduce the nursing by doing other activities with her child. Occasionally this helps, but often in the natural mothering process the child is not ready to skip a feeding, and tears roll down his face. It becomes quite evident through his behavior that he still has a real need to nurse, and to try to skip that nursing when he is tired before naptime or bedtime is almost impossible. With child-led weaning these feedings are gradually dropped when there is no longer a need, but many couples still experience frustration, or disappointment comes while waiting and waiting for the return of fertility. Some of these mothers are women who started having children later in life, and they see their reproductive years nearing an end.

A few couples will not be able to achieve pregnancy until after their child is completely weaned—even though they are having regular menstrual cycles and their chart shows the fertile signs and a strong post-ovulation thermal shift. Furthermore, the same woman who may be unable to become pregnant while nursing one baby can conceive easily while nursing another. One friend was nursing an almost-two-year-old and desired another baby. Her chart showed all the signs of fertility and she could not achieve pregnancy. Dr. Konald Prem, who helped us start our NFP organization, assured her she would get pregnant the first cycle after weaning. Eventually the child weaned and she did become pregnant the following cycle after weaning! I later met her at a conference, and she was nursing her third baby who was conceived while nursing her second child. Thus in her case, history did not repeat itself.

Most couples can look to a return of menstruation as a sign of future fertility if another baby is desired. But what happens if there is no return of menstruation? What are the feelings a couple is experiencing when they yearn for another baby but the mother is still in amenorrhea? A mother wrote about this particular problem:

“Our son will be three years old soon. Basically he nurses at nap, bedtimes, the odd time through the night, and on a bad day for comfort. I have read the CCL manual and have been practicing natural family planning as much as I can. My menstruation has not yet resumed, so I began taking my temperature and observing any mucus and cervical signs, looking hopefully for ovulation in spite of having no period. However, my temperatures remain low. The cervix remains low, firm, and closed; and to date there is no sign of fertile mucus.

All of this is unfortunately discouraging, as my husband and I wish to conceive again. I do hope for a return to fertility soon. I feel that any amount of sucking stimulation from my son is all that is necessary to suppress my ovulation. I’m sure I am on the long end of the scale for lactation amenorrhea. I do not wish to force weaning as I believe in allowing him to take the lead in his own development, but this does put me at odds—wanting to continue to meet my toddler’s needs.

Child spacing of three years is what I had hoped for, but it may extend to four years. I had enjoyed natural mothering immensely until recently and this, of course, is due to wanting another child.”

I received some excellent responses to this couple’s dilemma. I’d like to share them with you. They provide different insights to this particular problem which may be helpful to others in a similar situation.

“I would like to share the experience of someone I know. The woman married and conceived in her early twenties. She weaned the baby at about one year due to cultural reasons. She could not conceive again until after six years when she conceived with the help of a fertility drug. She liked the idea of baby-led weaning, but when 16 month old was still nursing, she made the decision to wean so she could go back onto fertility drugs to achieve another pregnancy. She weaned her toddler (not too happily) and before she could begin the drugs, she discovered she was pregnant. With this baby she was relaxed and didn’t worry about hurrying the weaning. But she discovered she was pregnant when the baby was a year old and this pregnancy turned out to be twins. Four children under the age of four are a handful. The situation made for a strained marital situation and strained economic situation. How different her situation may have been if she had listened to her second baby’s need to nurse a little longer. We never know what the future holds or what God has in store for us.

The three-year-old’s mother has no guarantee that she will ever conceive again or that her second baby will not miscarry. If it turned out that this was your only child, would you regret having weaned him prematurely? Babies spaced four or even five years apart may not be what you planned, but consider that you are meeting the needs of your three year old who, after all, is only on loan from the Lord. If Jesus Himself had carried the baby to your front door and asked you to ‘take the best possible care of him,’ what would you do?

From a practical point of view, rejoice! You’ll have the first child through college before the second child is there (not all bad). Take the best care you can of the child you have and trust in God for the children you hope for.”

“I always turn to your article first for support in my mothering style. My heart really went out to the mother who is nursing and wants to become pregnant. How discouraging to keep looking for fertility and discovering none. The difficult time can be depressing and makes it hard to enjoy the present time.

Take this special time in your son’s life to enjoy him. Do other mothering activities such as trips to the park, reading, painting, etc., and you might notice your son’s interest in nursing going down. If charting, please don’t spend all your energy looking at the chart for long periods of time and fretting over it like I did.

Our four children were planned, but they never came in the exact month or even the year that they were longed for. I had to accept the fact that God is the Creator and it was difficult to accept, but the acceptance has caused my faith to grow in the long run.”

“I read an article in our local La Leche League newsletter about a mother with a nursing three year old. She was unable to conceive until her doctor advised her to gain 10 pounds which she did. She became pregnant within about three months after the weight gain without altering her nursing pattern. I have a close friend who is very thin (5’6” and about 108-110 lb.). She breastfed two children and menstruation did not return until after each was weaned. It is well known that anorexic women do not menstruate. Perhaps some women are borderline and a few nursings a day are enough to suppress their cycles.”

“In regard to the woman who was writing regarding her lactation amenorrhea, I think this can raise a question: Can a couple be selfish in wanting more children? I’m not saying this couple is, but I do think we need to trust God’s design and timing more. If her fertility has not returned but her youngest still needs to nurse, this couple may want to seriously consider that the timing may not be right for another pregnancy yet. We planned our first child very deliberately but allowed God free reign with our second child. After 26 months of amenorrhea, I had four periods and conceived while charting laxly. If our baby had been born two weeks earlier or later, it would have been under extremely difficult circumstances. As it was, God’s timing was exquisite. It may be that more couples need to listen to the Lord more in guiding their family size and timing. It’s food for thought and prayer anyway.”

“I experienced amenorrhea for two years and nine months while nursing my twin sons. I had anxiously awaited my period from about the time they turned two. I also thought a spacing of about three years would be nice. I did not encourage them to slow down the nursing. When my period returned, they were nursing before bedtime and naptime. I did have a few months warning that fertility was returning by signs of mucus. I felt elated when I discovered that I was pregnant after only one cycle. I figured my plan of three years apart would only be altered by six months. But then in my twelfth week of pregnancy I miscarried the baby. We were devastated. I felt like my whole life was just one big wait.

The next four months were miserable. My periods returned but they were erratic and ovulation was hard to pinpoint. Often my cycle was extra long and I would think I was pregnant again only to start a period on day 38 or 40. Finally I did become pregnant and delivered a healthy son when my older boys turned four. The child is now 20 months.

Now that it’s over, the time it took to have another child seemed short. However, at the time I became consumed with the thoughts of pregnancy. I felt as if my body had played a cruel trick on me. Here I was doing what I thought was best for my sons by breastfeeding them, and, in a way, was being punished for it.

My conclusion has been to reconcile myself to God’s Will for us as a family. He has a divine plan for us and by allowing nature to do her thing I am not interfering with that plan. God’s ways are not our ways. He knows what is best for us and understands our destiny. We can never fully appreciate this with our limited knowledge and must therefore trust in Him when things are not going as we would like. This can be hard to accept as I well know, but I also know how fallible my decisions can be. To think about it honestly, I’m relieved to let this important decision about spacing and consequently the number of children up to God. He knows what He is doing. The challenge is for us to accept and adjust to it in a positive way.”

Sometimes it is nice to receive a follow-up letter to hear how events turned out after a mother has written. The mother who was nursing the three-year-old and desired another child wrote back, and this is what she had to say:

“Thanks for your letter of support and encouragement earlier this year. Nature has taken its course. This past weekend when my son turned three years old, I had my first postpartum period. We are now back to recording temperature and fertility signs after giving it up for several months. I reread *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*,

and a first postpartum period at 39 months was mentioned. I thought I would give myself at least that long, and it has happened.

I had been prepared for 18 to 24 months of amenorrhea, but three years seemed impossible. However, I feel it has proven best for our family. My son has always been a high need child and I'm sure he has needed all of this time alone. He is quite independent now and I feel he could accept my attention to a sibling. He would be about four years old when and if a new baby were to bless our family.

Our son still nurses at naptime and early evening before bedtime. I am sure the lack of night nursing is what finally allowed my hormonal system to return to normal cycles. I thought he was ready to wean, but he seemed to need his naptime nursing more than anything. Even when playing outside he'll stop play and tell me, "I need nappy. I need milky. Please, mommy." So we continue to enjoy this special time together. He is such a big boy in so many ways, but at this time he is still my baby who needs his mommy.

To think of nursing a toddler/child of this age would have been repulsive to me even when my first son was born; but having grown and evolved in this relationship together makes it so beautiful."

These disappointments over an early return of menstruation or over an extended amenorrhea are mentioned to help others who find themselves in a similar situation. Those who have an unexpected early return may start charting for the return of fertility. For those couples who anxiously await another pregnancy, they can realize that God's plan for them does not include another baby at this time. In both situations, the woman is happier once she accepts her own natural pattern. Hopefully, the disappointment will only be temporary and the nursing mother will go on from there, accepting the unexpected gracefully and finding support from others.