



## **The Breastfeeding Dilemma: Pros, Cons, and How to Know What's Right For You**

*Keya Williams, M.Ed & Whitney Robenolt, Psy.D.*

Welcoming a new baby to the family comes with many big decisions; everything from which latest gadget to purchase, to which parenting style to ascribe to are typical concerns of the newly minted parent. The choice to nurse your baby is no exception. While there is much research that highlights the benefits of nursing, as with all things in life, this decision is not simply black or white.

### **New Guidelines**

The American Pediatric Association continues to recommend that new parents breastfeed their babies for 6 straight months. This means that new parents are encouraged to give their babies only breastmilk during this time and to hold off on solid foods until at least 6 months.

What is new in 2022 from the APA is the recommendation that parents breastfeed up to 2 years old (this used to be one year), and beyond if parent and baby agree. If you think that is a long time, and may be too much to ask, you are not alone. But let us explore the potential pros and cons of these new recommendations.

### **Mental Health Benefits to Parent and Baby**

While becoming a new parent and being responsible for the well-being of a tiny human is stressful, studies suggest some mental health benefits for breastfeeding mothers. For instance, breastfeeding mothers reported lower anxiety, negative mood, and stress compared to mothers who formula fed infants. Additionally some breastfeeding moms show less physical signs of stress in social situations, which may help moms better handle the social pressures they face to 'parent perfectly.' Another interesting benefit to breastfeeding mothers is that they may sleep better and longer than non-breastfeeding parents (Krol & Grossmann, 2018). And what new parent doesn't need more sleep?

Breastfeeding in general, may help moms form and strengthen their bond with their babies. For example, Krol and Grossman (2018) point out that moms who breastfeed tend to touch their babies more and spend more time eye gazing with infants. These activities can be soothing and stress relieving for both mom and child.

Finally, those authors mention that mothers who breastfeed feel less depressed and are less likely to develop postpartum depression. This is, of course, if all goes well in a new mom's attempt to nurse.

### **Stigma, Pressure, and the Stress of Nursing**

Some mothers may have life events that keep them from following the breastfeeding guidelines; however, they can feel pressured and stressed by other parents and society to do so. For instance, they may be physically unable to nurse or find it unbearably painful. This can certainly weigh on a parent's feelings about breastfeeding.

For instance, mothers may feel disappointed that the breastfeeding experience is more challenging than they anticipated. In addition, new moms may have jobs that are unsupportive or keep them away from their babies for long periods of time.

Of course there may also be worrying that a baby is not getting enough milk due to not being able to pump enough or concern that the baby will refuse an artificial nipple. All of these challenges may keep a mother from breastfeeding, which may affect a new parent's mood.

### **Tips to Making the Best Feeding Choice for You**

1. Check in with yourself: Being clear on what kind of parent you want to be is no easy task. But it is worth asking yourself if you are breastfeeding because others expect you to, or because you really want to. If you are clear on your intention to breastfeed you may be more willing to jump over the obstacles that come with it, and feel more triumphant when you make progress towards your goals.
2. Do some reality testing: There are many moms who breastfeed and many who do not. Many of those children grow to be healthy and productive human beings, no matter how they were first fed.
3. Cut yourself some slack: Remember that your child needs a "good enough" parent, not a perfect parent. As parents, we will make choices that do not always turn out the way we hoped. That is okay. Practice a bit of self-compassion, and trust that you have done your best to care for your baby.
4. Make the best decision for you: You may try breastfeeding and find it just does not work for you for a lot of different reasons. Or, you may decide to never start. All is okay. You have the right to change your mind. You have the right to make any decision about your parenting that is best for you and your family.
5. Check in with the professionals: Having the support and guidance from an expert, like your family doctor or lactation consultant, can help you make the best decision for your family. Don't be afraid to reach out and get the professional support you need.

### **References**

Krol, K. M., & Grossmann, T. (2018). Psychological effects of breastfeeding on children and mothers. *Bundesgesundheitsblatt-Gesundheitsforschung-Gesundheitsschutz*, 61(8), 977-985.  
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