

Breastfeeding BEYOND babyhood

So your baby's one, now what? Instead of weaning, some mums choose to embrace breastfeeding a walking, talking toddler. **SIMONE CASEY** looks at the nutritional and emotional needs of these breastfed tots

Mention toddlers breastfeeding and the now-famous image of American mum Jamie Lynne Grumet offering the breast to her three-year-old son on the cover of *Time* magazine is often brought up. Then the questions start. Is he too old? Is breastfeeding at this age all for the mother? Can he be getting anything nutritious?

Breastfeeding into toddlerhood may be seen as controversial for some, but it's perfectly natural and it's not as uncommon as you may think. The 2010 Australian National Infant Feeding Survey showed 18 per cent of kids between the ages of 13 and 18 months were still receiving breastmilk, as were seven per cent of littlies aged between 19 and 24 months.

I DIDN'T PLAN IT!

Mums who breastfeed their children past their first birthday often don't set out to do

so but find it evolves naturally, as it did for mother-of-three Victoria Pollock, who breastfed her second child, Caitlin, until she was nearly two, and her third child, James, until he was two-and-a-half. "I was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to continue, even while working," she says. "Breastfeeding became my magic wand for overtiredness, bringing down a fever and settling to sleep in any situation or place. Weaning always seemed like too much hard work and I just found going with the flow easier."

If you find that breastfeeding works for you, there are lots of great reasons to keep it up. "There are ongoing immune, nutritional and emotional benefits to the child for as long as he breastfeeds," says Renee Kam, from the Australian Breastfeeding Association. "Even after children stop breastfeeding, lower infection rates have been identified among children who are breastfed for a longer versus a shorter duration."

Nutritionally, breastfeeding your toddler 450ml of milk a day can provide 29 per cent of his daily energy needs, 43 per cent of his protein requirement, 75 per cent of his vitamin A needs and 60 per cent of his vitamin C. If you have a fussy eater on your hands, then, you can rest assured that your tyke is getting the good stuff by continuing to drink your milk.

Emotionally, breastfeeding is a great leveller, too. "As children grow older, breastfeeding becomes less about food and more a way of connecting with their mum," explains Renee. Case in point, mum-of-two Yvette Curlis says her two-year-old daughter, Abby, loves to snuggle in for a breastfeed but has told her expressed milk is "yucky".

To cap it all off, there are health advantages to breastfeeding your tot for you as well: women who breastfeed for more than two years have half the risk of breast cancer as



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women who breastfeed for six months, according to researchers at the Yale University School of Medicine and Yale Cancer Center in the US.

MAKING IT WORK

Just as mothering your child into toddlerhood enters a whole new dimension of language development and play, so too, does breastfeeding – so be prepared! “I’ve noticed a definite change in the breastfeeding dynamic with Merrilina since she passed the one-year mark,” says mum-of-one Bryony Hesson. “She’s been ‘acrobatic’ feeding for months, but recently has started combining breastfeeding with whatever little game she may be playing – draping her sock over my nipple and triumphantly removing it, piling puzzle pieces on my boob, ‘washing’ it with the wet washcloth she’s been using to scrub at the wall. I once would have thought that a child’s interest in the breast would gradually decline in toddlerhood, but if anything, she’s become more attached.”

How and when you choose to breastfeed your toddler is entirely up to you, which is good news if you’re a working mama. “Generally, toddlers can go without breastfeeding for many hours, provided they have other healthy drinks and snacks provided and are content,” says Renee. Breasts are very clever, too, in that they will adapt to provide enough milk to allow you to breastfeed as much as you like – even if you only breastfeed once on a work day and then want to feed more frequently on days off.

COPING WITH CRITICISM

For some mummies, it’s the thought of how other people might react that can put them off breastfeeding their babies into toddlerhood. And unfortunately, many mums who breastfeed their toddlers do notice a few more raised eyebrows, even from family and close friends.

WHAT KIDS THINK!

We asked five breastfeeding toddlers what they think Mum’s breastmilk tastes like and these were their answers:

1. Honey
2. Hugging
3. White chocolate
4. “Just boobie milk”
5. Chocolate and strawberry

BREASTFEEDING MANNERS

Toddlers like to have their own way, but when it involves your breasts, you may have other ideas. Lactation consultant and psychiatric nurse Brooke Higgs gives her five top tips for teaching little ones to breastfeed on Mummy’s terms:

- 1 Like any strategy for managing a toddler’s behaviour, consistency is important. If you don’t want your toddler breastfeeding at the supermarket, then don’t breastfeed him on some trips but not others.
- 2 Introduce the concept of waiting: “Mummy will give you your milk when we get to the car”. Toddlers don’t often like having to wait, but if you are consistent in your approach your child will catch on. Make sure you do breastfeed when you get to the car or home or wherever you have promised at the end of the waiting period so your tot knows you say what you mean!

3 Find something special that your toddler loves to play with and use this to distract him from wanting to breastfeed at times you’re not happy with. Hide it when you don’t need it or it will lose its effectiveness very quickly. Something portable that you can hide in your handbag is helpful.

4 If you don’t want to breastfeed your toddler while out and about, have a special chair at home (or nanna’s, or a certain friend’s place) where this is the only place that your toddler is breastfed.

5 For boobie grabbers, try wearing clothing where your toddler cannot easily access the breast. Say calmly, “You can have a breastfeed when we get home,” while moving your child’s hand away from your breast. As your toddler gets older he may even learn what colour bra or certain clothing item means “no boobie”!

“I’ve received a lot of looks from people all through Daphne’s breastfeeding life,” says Charleen Warburton, who breastfed her two-year-old daughter until she was 19 months and is due to give birth to bub number two in April. “Daphne’s always had a lot of hair and people thought she was older than she was. I just learnt to ignore them.

I’ve had a few faces pulled when I’ve expressed how I wouldn’t mind if she came back to the breast once her brother or sister is born, too.”

Clinical psychologist Dr Maya Griffiths agrees with the approach of ignoring any looks and quiet comments that aren’t said directly to you.

But if someone comes up to you to give their opinion? “People often make critical remarks even if they are naive about the topic at hand, so it can be helpful to remember this as it is easier to brush off negative comments. Therefore, ignoring any glances or quiet comments may be all that’s necessary,” Dr Griffiths says. “It can also be useful to inform and educate people as very few members of the public are aware that the World Health Organization and the Australian Breastfeeding Association recommend breastfeeding until the age of two, as a minimum. When confronting people in this way it is always good practice to be polite and diplomatic so as to not get others off side.”

A common criticism of mothers feeding older children is that they’re doing it for their own benefit. Dr Griffiths says that this couldn’t be further from the truth. “You can’t force an infant or toddler to breastfeed, so it’s rarely about the mother,” she says. “Again, a lot of this criticism comes from people being misinformed. Providing a place of comfort as

the child needs it can be a critical part of his emotional development. When an infant or toddler has this secure attachment, he then has an improved ability to manage and negotiate his environment and social interactions with others.”

Whether you set out to or not, if you find yourself wrangling a toddler who is still breastfeeding you’ll be discovering a whole new purpose for the breast, whether it’s a nice hill to run a toy car over, something that reunites you with your child after a day at work, or an instant tantrum tamer. Yes, you are providing your toddler with super-nutritious breastmilk, but it’s so much more than that. ★

“How and when you choose to breastfeed your toddler is entirely up to you”

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that babies be exclusively breastfed until around six months of age, with breastfeeding to continue alongside appropriate first foods until at least 12 months of age. While breastfeeding is the ideal way to nourish your baby, we recognise that not all mums are able to do so. If you have any concerns about your breastfed or bottle-fed baby, make an appointment with your child health nurse or GP.