

Handling criticism about breastfeeding

Unfortunately, many mothers end up having to deal with criticism about their choice to breastfeed at one point or another. Criticism from strangers happens occasionally, but tends to be easier to deal with since you're unlikely to see those people again. Criticism from family members and others close to you can be much harder to handle.

Sometimes the people close to you - particularly your parents - feel that when you make parenting choices that are different from their own, it is a *personal attack on their own parenting choices*. They may truly feel that accepting your parenting choices is the same thing as admitting that their own parenting choices were *wrong*. It may be helpful to make it clear that your choices are not a judgment on their parenting, but a result of having different information available that you are using to make choices for your own unique child and family.

Always keep in mind that family members and close friends who make negative comments about breastfeeding generally do so because they *care* for you and your child, even if their comments are uninformed or inappropriate.

Techniques for responding to criticism

Educate

Many people simply aren't aware that there are continuing benefits of breastfeeding for mother and child. They do not know that there is a huge amount of research data that supports sustained breastfeeding-- particularly regarding the health benefits. State the *scientific facts* about why breastfeeding is beneficial. Print off some written material and leave it around your house --the bathroom is always a good place! Gently ask the person who is criticizing you to read through it--not for the sake of argument, but for the sake of considering what is beneficial for your child.

Respond to specific concerns

Try to find out exactly *why* they feel nursing is a problem - this way you can respond to specific concerns and correct any misinformation. Do they think that there are no benefits to baby? Are they worried what others will think? Have they read the research? Have they met other families with children who were breastfed for an extended time?

Talk about how certain comments make you feel

It may be helpful to have a heart-to-heart talk with someone who has too many negative things to say about breastfeeding. This unsupportive person may need to hear you say how these comments *hurt* you and your child (particularly if your child is older), and that you need them to *stop*. Children often understand a lot more than you realize, and negative comments and actions can be confusing and upsetting to them. Your words may get through, or at least prevent this person from criticizing breastfeeding in your or your child's presence.

Quote an authority

Some people who will not listen to you will listen to a doctor or other professional. Say that your child's doctor recommends continued nursing. If your doctor is firmly pro-breastfeeding, take the unsupportive person with you to a

doctor appointment so they can hear it for themselves. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that "breastfeeding continue for at least 12 months, and thereafter for as long as mutually desired." The World Health Organization recommends that babies be breastfed for *at least* two years.

Laugh it off

Some have found humor to be an effective way to hush others. You might come back with something like, "Don't worry. I don't think I'll have to room-in with her when she moves into the dorm at college!"

Avoid the issue

Another way to handle criticism is to do your best to avoid the issue. If the subject of breastfeeding comes up, politely change the subject. Try to go into a different room to nurse to avoid or minimize any direct comments *to* your child.

Make the subject completely off-bounds

Some parents (particularly when others are very opposed to continued breastfeeding) find it most effective to refuse to argue or discuss the matter at all. It's sometimes necessary to be nice but firm: "This is my child and my parenting choice and I will not discuss it anymore." If they **DO** bring the subject up, answer with the exact same phrase every time (for example, "This is what works for our family") until they realize that the matter is not up for discussion. If that doesn't work, then *leave*.

What if nothing is working?

When you are willing to debate the matter, some people will feel that they have a good chance of convincing you that you are wrong--and thus will continue with their objections ad infinitum. Sometimes a person is not really interested in hearing your reasons, but only wants to keep "wearing you down" until you do things their way. If it's just an *emotional* response that they are having, and they can't give any reasons for it (or keep giving 'bad' reasons one after another as soon as you answer, without any intention of stopping or listening to you), then you might be better off with doing things like using humor, avoiding the issue or making the subject off-bounds.

Express confidence in your decision while being as diplomatic as possible (depending upon who you're talking to). Once they realize that there is no chance of dissuading you, then they may give up the argument, or at least tone it down. Repeat the same statement every time the issue comes up. Eventually it will get through.

"In some cultures it is considered a child's birthright to be nursed until the age of two. It is believed all your sins are forgiven when you nurse your baby, and an angel stands behind you and pats you on the back when are done. I like to think of an angel standing behind me every time I nurse. It is a very comforting thought when things aren't going well. If you can't get support from your family, at least the angels are behind you."
-- Diane

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Responses to criticism that other parents have used

- "That's interesting. What makes you think that?"
- "I'm parenting the way that feels right to me."
- "I respect your opinion and value your advice, but I have thought this out carefully and done a lot of research, and my mind is made up. I will be happy to respect your opinion and listen to what you have to say, but you have to respect my decision--and it is MY decision."
- "As the mother of this baby, and because of all I've learned about the importance of breastfeeding, in my heart of hearts this is what I want - and need - to do for my child right now. If you love us both, you need to support me in this decision."
- "You know how the medical community is always changing their recommendations. Well, this is what they recommend now--this is the best I have to go on, and I feel good about breastfeeding."
- "We're working on weaning now." [Once solids are introduced, you're technically in the process of weaning- though it may take a few years.]
- "This is what works for our family. Unless it becomes a problem, we're not going to change things." [Case closed--save the arguments for someone who is truly interested in listening to them.]
- "Why would I want to replace nursing with something that costs money and is nutritionally and immunologically inferior?" [This one is not exactly tactful, so consider who you're talking to before you use it.]
- Responses to your parents:
 - o "Now that I've become a mother, I have a new appreciation for what you went through for me, and I'm so thankful to be able to come to you for advice. It especially helps to know that you're going to support me in my decision to breastfeed, because that means so much to me."
 - o "It's not that I resent you for not breastfeeding me - I don't. You made the decision that was right for you and your baby (me). I am making the decision that is right for us."
- The "sandwich" technique sometimes works:
 - o Say something complimentary first: "I'm so glad you are here to be with my children; Having a loving grandma like you is so important; You are such a wonderful grandma, just like I knew you would be."
 - o Then make the point you are trying to make: "It really upsets me when you criticize my choice and my pediatrician's recommendation to breastfeed to the degree that I feel I might start to avoid visiting with you."
 - o Then say something nice again: "That would make me sad because I know you love the children and I want them to have you in their life because you are so special."

"Although it can be difficult, mothers need to trust their own mothering urges as fully as their children do."

-- NJ Bumgarner, *Mothering Your Nursing Toddler*, 2000, p. 62.

Extended Breastfeeding Resources

Web pages

Extended Breastfeeding Articles from NEW BEGINNINGS
www.la lecheleague.org/NB/NBextended.html

Kathy Dettwyler's Thoughts on Breastfeeding
www.kathydettwyler.org

Nursing After the First Year
www.kellymom.com/bf/bfextended/

Breastfeeding During Pregnancy & Tandem Nursing
www.nursingtwo.com

LLLI FAQ: How do I respond to and avoid criticism about breastfeeding?
www.la lecheleague.org/FAQ/criticism.html

Responding to Criticism by Marianne Vakiener, from NEW BEGINNINGS, Vol. 16 No. 4, July-August 1999, pp. 116-19.
www.la lecheleague.org/NB/NBJulAug99p116.html

Books

Bumgarner NJ. MOTHERING YOUR NURSING TODDLER. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 2000.

Flower H. ADVENTURES IN TANDEM NURSING: BREASTFEEDING DURING PREGNANCY AND BEYOND. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 2003.

LLLI. THE WOMANLY ART OF BREASTFEEDING. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 2004.

Bengson D. HOW WEANING HAPPENS. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 1999.

"Parents and health professionals need to recognize that the benefits of breastfeeding (nutritional, immunological, cognitive, emotional) continue as long as breastfeeding itself does, and that there never comes a point when you can replace breast milk with infant formula, cows' milk or any other food, or breastfeeding with a pacifier or teddy bear, without some costs to the child."

-- KA Dettwyler, "Beauty and the Breast" in *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*, 1995, p. 204.

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