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The Bogus Breastfeeding Debate Over Nursing Older Kids

Nursing a child until he's ready to quit offers physical and emotional benefits for both kids and moms, says breastfeeding educator Diane Wiessinger—so stop gawking and start supporting!

by Diane Wiessinger | May 22, 2012 4:45 AM EDT

Despite the brouhaha, *Time* magazine's recent cover that sparked controversy with an image of a 3-year-old boy breastfeeding depicts an incredibly normal slice of life around the world. Well, normal minus the fact that the child is inexplicably standing on a chair and nursing hands-free.

I was one of those mothers who nursed way longer than our culture says we "should." Like most of us, I never asked myself, "Why on earth should I keep going?" I thought, "Why on earth would I stop?" Each time I nursed my two sons, it was just a response to a need—a need I met in the simplest, easiest, most effective way I knew. I wasn't a martyr to some child-rearing ideal. It just felt right.

Over time I discovered that nursing an older child is a well-kept parenting secret. Nursing helped to assuage injuries, fatigue, crankiness, and even sickness. Come to think of it, whenever *I* was cranky or sick, a little nursing usually mellowed us both out.

Sadly, most mothers in this country don't get to enjoy that relationship. One in four American babies never tastes his mother's milk. By a year, only about one child in five is still nursing. Our national statistics don't even bother counting beyond that. But around the world, the peak age of weaning falls between about 2 and 3 years old; physiologically, mothers and children are designed for somewhere between [two-and-a-half and seven years of nursing](#).

So the real outrage isn't that some mothers measure their nursing experience in years. It's that most mothers don't get the support and nods of approval from their circles—family, community, the health-care system, media—that would help them to relax into a very ordinary nursing relationship of whatever length they choose.

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Research hasn't found [any physical or emotional disadvantages](#) to a mother and her child nursing for as long as they like—yet there are thousands of studies on the risks incurred when mothers are prevented from breastfeeding. It's serious stuff; those [risks include](#) SIDS, diabetes, and certain cancers in children, and breast and ovarian cancers and heart attacks in women.

And the increased risks rack up health-care bills that we all have to pay. [One study](#) projected that if 80 percent of our babies could avoid formula and solids for six months (as recommended by the World Health Organization), we'd save about \$10.5 billion a year in unnecessary medical bills and lost workdays. Today, even though 75 percent of our babies start out breastfeeding, almost half of those have already had formula by the time they leave the hospital.

What can be wrong with something that saves health-care dollars and keeps a child quiet on an airplane?

As soon as a baby nurses, his mother's breast begins producing antibodies specific to any new germs he may have picked up. You won't see that on a formula label. In fact, there are [hundreds of ingredients in human milk](#) that formula can't mimic.

Does it matter how long a child taps into all that good stuff? Absolutely. The effects of breastfeeding are considered "dose-dependent"—the more the better. The American Academy of Pediatrics [urges no less than a year](#) of breastfeeding; the World Health Organization [promotes a minimum of two years](#). Neither organization sees any need for an upper limit. As Arthur Eidelman, president of the [Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine](#), explains, "Claims that breastfeeding beyond infancy is harmful to mother or infant have absolutely no medical or scientific basis. Indeed, the more salient issue is the damage caused by modern practices of premature weaning." I mean, really, what's wrong with something that saves health-care dollars and keeps a child quiet on an airplane?

My own two sons stopped nursing near each end of the physiological "weaning window," one at close to 3, the other closer to 5 or 6. (Nursing often tapers off so gradually that no one in the family quite knows when it stopped.) Different children, different needs. Breastfeeding isn't about calendars or Internet opinion—it's about the people *directly* involved.

When my older son was 2, I realized I was having fun with an age that mothers are usually warned about. Two-year-olds aren't reasonable, so how do nursing mothers reason with them? We don't. We nurse them, which reduces stress on both sides. Mix the normalcy of nursing into their day, and the defiant, tantrum-prone, bedtime-hating "terrible two" is the exception, not the rule.

At 3, lots of us still connect with our children through nursing. The relationship changes, of course. We "negotiate" the nursings more. "How about an apple?" or "Wait until I finish what I'm doing." And our children's need for a nursing connection lessens over time. Children don't nurse any longer than they want to, and it's all well within the range of normal human behavior. So why did the *Time* cover generate such high emotion?

Maybe the cover was just too much too fast. This country hasn't seen normal-length breastfeeding since the late 1800s. By the mid-1900s, the "scientific" approach to mothering—hospital births, feeding on a schedule, "hygienic" separation of mothers and babies, supplementing with formula "just to be sure"—made breastfeeding [all but impossible](#). And formula marketing was right there, promising safety and convenience.

Then there's today's culture. Nursing is touchy-feely, and America is squeamish about anything touchy-feely outside of sex and art. R-rated movies? Breasts to sell cars or beer? No problem. Most people are fine with paintings of a Madonna nursing a near-toddler, without realizing that, given the subjects' time and place, they probably kept it up for a few more years.

And there's the invisibility. Older children don't usually nurse when they're out and about. You may see a child gathered in for a nursing cuddle after a playground spill, but that's about it.

I think my older son said it best, years ago. It was bedtime. His younger brother, who was maybe 4 at the time, wanted to nurse, but I was beginning to wonder if he was “too old.” From the next bed, older brother said, “Oh, Mommy, *I* think it’s silly. But if he wants to, I think you should let him.” Well, of course. Whose business was it but my child’s and mine? I might add that both of my sons have turned out to be smart, funny, confident fathers of toddler-age nurslings themselves. And they’re not taken in by beer commercials.

So here’s a thought: the next time you see a nursing mother in public, no matter how old her child is, ask her why she breastfeeds. It might help you understand how the mother and son on *Time*’s cover got to where they are, even if it doesn’t explain why they’re standing that way. And if you *don’t* see any nursing mothers in public, well, ask yourself why not.

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