



# Continuing Breastfeeding Beyond The First Year

If you are still breastfeeding your child through his first birthday, you can congratulate yourself on having provided him with the best nutrition he could possibly receive. Now that he is consuming a wide variety of solid foods, your breast milk has become somewhat less critical from a nutritional perspective. Some toddlers continue to consume a moderate amount of breast milk (and thus the nutrients it contains), while others “graze” and ingest smaller quantities, getting most of their nutrition elsewhere. Certainly there is no known point at which breast milk becomes nutritionally negligible. What we do know is that as your child moves from babyhood toward toddlerhood, breastfeeding continues to act as a source of profound comfort and security, laying the groundwork for a confident, happy, and healthy future. For this reason, as well as the continued nutritional and immunologic benefits of breastfeeding, the AAP advises mothers to continue nursing beyond the first year for as long as mutually desired by mother and child.



## Starting the Journey Toward Self-Mangement

Many mothers appreciate the power and practicality of breastfeeding to soothe a toddler’s emotions, reassure him of their presence, and provide comfort in an often confusing world. Other women worry that continuing breastfeeding into toddlerhood prevents a child from learning to handle his emotions in alternative ways. The fact is, though, that toddlers need emotional reassurance frequently during the day. It is as valid and acceptable for a toddler to breastfeed for comfort as it is for him to suck a pacifier or thumb.

## Dealing With Others' Opinions

Our culture can sometimes project a somewhat limited view of acceptable breastfeeding practices; while nursing toddlers are becoming amore common sight, they still occasionally provoke comments and stares from uninformed adults. When deciding how long to breastfeed your child, a more valid yardstick than public opinion is your own child’s approach to nursing and your own feelings about it. These feelings are no doubt being communicated to your child. Do you feel that he is dependent on the breast for comfort to the point that it interferes with his social growth (just as a toddler whose relationship with his blanket is so intense that he’s unable to put it down to play with a friend)? Are you concerned that his continued nursing is causing other adults (such as a child care provider, preschool teacher, or other important person in his life) to label him in negative ways? Are your own mixed feelings about breastfeeding a toddler interfering with your relationship with him, making you a reluctant and less supportive partner? If your answers to all of these questions are no, then there is no reason to hasten the weaning process.

Mothers who have chosen to continue breastfeeding their toddlers have found many creative ways of dealing with the surprise and uninformed disapproval they encounter among other adults. Many women teach their children a “code word” to use when they want to breastfeed (such as “mimi” or “nonny”), so that the matter remains private between the two of them. Some women then retire with their toddlers to a private place to breastfeed. On the other hand, others make a point of breastfeeding in public, perhaps in the hopes of making it more acceptable for toddlers to continue nursing.

Certainly even in this country the general attitude toward breastfeeding is gradually improving. Thanks to political activism by parents’ groups and professional organizations, many states have enacted laws protecting a woman’s right to breastfeed. In fact, as of 2010, forty-four states, plus the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands, had laws allowing mothers to nurse in any public or private location. Only five states have no breastfeeding laws of any kind. Most of these laws state that it is a woman’s right to breastfeed wherever she can legally be with her baby. Federal legislation guarantees the right of breastfeeding mothers to nurse their babies anywhere on federal property where the mother and baby have the right to be. This is a good thing not only for mothers, who so frequently have been harassed simply for caring for their children, but also for children, who benefit from all the nutrition, comfort, and love they receive. There is even federal legislation to protect the rights of working mothers to express their milk at the workplace.

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In the end, the decision about how long to breastfeed your baby is one that only you—with help from your baby—should make. The nursing relationship is a unique bond, one that ideally should be supported by your partner and other family members. So whether it ends when your baby is six months old or three years old is a personal choice. Follow your instincts, and do what is best for you and your baby.

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