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My name is Melissa Ballantyne. My daughter Lauren is now aged 3 3/4.

Lauren was breastfed to the age of 16 months at which time she weaned herself.

Prior to Lauren's birth I had very little knowledge of breastfeeding & had actually never seen anyone breastfeed at close quarters. I thought the ability to breastfeed would just come naturally & therefore I did not seek any information on this. My focus like many first time mums was on the birth. In many aspects of my life I like to gather information but due to my belief in the naturalness of breastfeeding I didn't do any research during my pregnancy. I came to find out that knowledge about breastfeeding is very helpful in leading to breastfeeding success.

After finding out that I was pregnant I would have found it very useful to be advised about the importance of learning about breastfeeding before the birth & what resources were available to help me learn eg classes. Perhaps information could be prominent in the blue book provided to all pregnant women & in the information packs provided by hospitals etc

In hindsight perhaps an advertising campaign may have alerted me to learning about breastfeeding prior to the birth. The focus of such a campaign could be that while breastfeeding is natural it is very useful to learn how breastfeeding works & how to do it. I found out that one of the keys to breastfeeding successfully was knowing about correct positioning. I think it is especially important to get this message across to first time mothers because if they can breastfeed successfully with their first child they will hopefully be the same with subsequent babies. Failure the first time around may lead to failure in the future. Its such a confidence issue & new mothers can feel really guilty if they give up in the early stages of a baby's life. Perhaps something similar to the alcohol & pregnancy , folic acid & pregnancy campaigns.

When Lauren was born I found attachment difficult & this continued for several weeks during which time I suffered sore & cracked nipples. I came to realise that there was a thing or two I needed to know about breastfeeding so I sought help at the hospital where my daughter was born. At the time of Lauren's birth there were no in home visits from nurses etc like there is now. I think it is a great initiative to have home visits especially if the nurses have specific training around breastfeeding issues. I would have really appreciated this as it is often very difficult for mothers of newborns to get out of the house & in contact with professionals. The difficulties can be made worse if the mother is recovering from a difficult birth, is depressed or isolated because of where she lives or if she doesn't speak English.

I saw one of the midwives at the hospital who whilst well-meaning gave me advice which proved to be incorrect. I was told that Lauren was not putting on enough weight & I needed to increase my supply. I tried to do this by expressing milk but initially this was very difficult & I barely expressed enough for one feed. I was not really encouraged to breastfeed so when Lauren was a couple of weeks old I started to think about giving up as I was concerned about her weight gain. I later found out that weight gain in breastfeed newborns is not necessarily according to the charts they use. I firmly believe that accurate & easily available information is one of the keys to successful breastfeeding.

I have often asked mothers what led them to give up breastfeeding in the first couple of months & many have given me reasons which are based on incorrect advice given to them by friends , family & what surprised me health professionals. It seems to me crucial that all health professionals coming into contact with breastfeeding mothers must have at least a basic understanding of breastfeeding issues, Ideally health professionals should have refresher courses as well. Perhaps more professionals could make in home visits on a regular basis at least during the baby's first six months.

A really helpful resource is the availability of telephone counselling. Telephone counselling should be well funded so that it is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week and it should be staffed by paid well trained health professionals.

All areas of the health sector should incorporate breastfeeding as the first critical stage of nutrition. The message needs to be loud & clear that breastfeeding is far superior to bottlefeeding - it is not just milk coming from a different container. Encouragement of breastfeeding should be a core activity for many health organisations not just the Australian Breastfeeding

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Association. Organisations such as the Breast Cancer Institute have a role to play in encouraging breastfeeding because of the link between breastfeeding and reduced incidence of breast cancer.

In terms of encouraging breastfeeding when you are out and about I found it very useful if there was a readily available feed and change room in the shopping centre, cinema, restaurant etc that I was attending. It is really helpful to sometimes breastfeed in private where the baby is less distracted & it is easier to encourage the let down reflex. Just making it legal to breastfeed anywhere is just the beginning. Having society make you feel welcome and normal is the ideal.

I would encourage the Federal Government to resource appropriately the promotion of breastfeeding in Australia. It is the best start that we can give our children whilst at the same time providing many benefits to society as a whole.

Yours sincerely

Melissa Ballantyne