


**Submission no. 220**AUTHORISED: 4/4/07 

My name is Rachael Torepe, I am a volunteer breastfeeding counsellor with the Australian Breastfeeding Association.

I am currently running the Centenary/Forest Lake ABA group, I have been the only qualified counsellor in the group for the past year and have recently had a group member qualify as a community educator (CE). At the moment I would spend at least three hours a week on the computer and phone, helping mothers and running the group. Our group also meet up every fortnight, where I facilitate a Discussion Topic, so on those weeks I spend another three to four hours at the meeting. Our group is a very active social group and because of this we tend to have extended meetings, and organise one social activity a month as well. I also am rostered on the ABA helpline for a seven hour shift every two months.

My experience with mothers who contact me either via the helpline, or through the group, has lead me to believe they are very thankful (once they find out about it, some mothers discover there is such an association after they have had the need for it), for an association such as the Australian Breastfeeding Association, and are relieved to be chatting to mothers just like them who are supportive of the choices they make without being judgmental. As an association I feel we are seriously undervalued for all the help we give to mothers. There seems to be an impression out there that we are fanatical and to join or come along to our meetings you also need to be fanatical or be still breastfeeding your baby/child. We are simply mothers, and fathers (some of whom are also qualified as community educators, CEs), who want to help. We want new parents and health professionals to know we are here, for breastfeeding information, help and support. Our meetings do cover breastfeeding discussion topics, but also other aspects of parenting. We are having a big problem with getting our message across and becoming known due to the costs involved.

I hear of a lot of mothers who have been misinformed by health professionals, and their friends and relatives, about how breastmilk is no longer beneficial for the older baby, ie. after 12 months of age. I also believe there are a lot of wonderful health professionals out there who keep up to date with breastfeeding information, but there are also some from the 'old school', who are needing to update their information. These are the ones who may misinform parents which may lead them into a negative breastfeeding experience, causing them to wean. This can have a snowballing effect and can lead to negative comments to other breastfeeding mums.

I have experienced, via the helpline and new mothers who come along to my group meetings, new mums being pressured into supplementing their babies either because of low birth weight or low weight gain, without being told that they need to express to keep up their supply. This then impacts on their milk supply, making it a vicious circle where they never seem to build up their supply enough to fully breastfeed again, even once their baby has started gaining weight. There are WHO health charts available for the breastfeeding mums, which are based on the average weight and length of breastfeed babies, and more new mums and health professionals need to know about them. Maybe a baby's weight isn't so much of a worry if it's measurements are charted on these charts rather than the charts based on formula feed babies.

A lot of mothers tell me they would have liked to learn more about breastfeeding before having their baby, some antenatal classes don't seem to have a very big session on breastfeeding, the one I went to when I was pregnant with my first son only had about half an hour. ABA do Breastfeeding Education Classes, but not many health professionals know about them it seems.

I feed my second son until he was 4 years old, I have been very lucky that I have had support, perhaps this is because my friends and family knowing about my involvement in ABA and haven't dared say anything negative, or they have learnt of the benefits of breastfeeding through listening to me talk to mothers. But I do hear about mothers who have had comments made even when their babies are 6 months old, 'When are they going to wean?', or 'Surely your baby can't be still getting anything from your milk now!', or a favourite 'You are only doing that for yourself!'. The benefits and nutrition of breastmilk does not change suddenly just because your baby is, 6mths, 9 mths, a year, or even 5 years. The world Health Organisation does

recommend breastfeeding to two years and beyond.

Another thing I have noticed through some of the mums who come to our group and through talking to mothers I meet at my children's school and kindy, is the negative support they have had from their employers, so negative they have given up the idea of continuing breastfeeding because they are not given the time to express, a place to express and somewhere to put the milk. Can't employer's learn that by supporting their employees to continue breastfeeding it will be of benefit to them. Less time off for child illnesses, a more dedicated employee, who will work diligently because she is grateful and will want to get her work done efficiently and on time in order to get home to her child. Time is given to smokers, so why not to breastfeeding mums.

Everytime I see an advertisement for the 'Follow-on Formulas (there are so many on the market), I get discouraged about how we can educate parents about how important (healthwise and emotionally), it is to continue to breastfeed after their baby is twelve months of age. To me these advertisements seem to indicate that toddlers need all the added nutrients when, in fact, breastmilk is specifically made for the human child! The nutrients in breastmilk are more easily absorbed and toddlers should be getting plenty of nutrients from their diet as well. It would be better to educate parents about the benefits of continuing breastfeeding well into their child's first, as well as how to provide them with a healthy diet with tips on ways to get the food into fussy eaters. I worry some parents may use the follow-on milk as a quick fix to replace a healthy meal. These formula companies have the funds to pay for major advertising campaigns, where-as a non-profit organisation like ABA, which has been formed for the benefit of parents and their babies/children, can't get any publicity.

I was lucky enough to successly breastfeed both my sons, my first until he self weaned at one year of age and the second until he was four. I was also lucky enough to have found out and become involved with ABA when my first son was very young, so had the support and information there when I needed it. Both my boys have been extremely healthy, well adjusted individuals, with rarely a sick day, and if sick, for a very short period. I am hoping the generation of children who have grown up with their parent's involvement in ABA will help towards more tolerance for breastfeeding in public, and have learnt through observing mothers breastfeeding, will think of it as the most natural thing in the world. I know my youngest son seems to have a good rapport with babies and when I have seen him role-playing 'feeding' his dolls or stuffed toys he seems to have the correct positioning and a lovely maternal look on his face.

Thankyou for spending the time to read my submission, and I wish you luck with the enquiry.

Rachael Torepe.

Group leader of the Australian Breastfeeding Association Centenary/Forest Lake group.