

*Submission to the inquiry into breastfeeding*

I would like to contribute my experience to the submissions presented to the Inquiry into Breastfeeding in Australia.

My experience of breastfeeding my first daughter was extremely disappointing. When I was pregnant I fully intended to breastfeed, and was unprepared for the hurdles I faced. Potential problems and difficulties could perhaps have been better addressed in the prenatal and breastfeeding classes I attended.

My daughter was born an average weight and made steady weight gains for the first month. She was also a very unsettled baby. At her 4 week check up she had only gained 50 grams for that week and I was advised by the maternal and child health nurse to top her up with formula as she was probably hungry. I also hired an electric breast pump to express in an attempt to keep my supply up, but this did not work and I feel this was the turning point that ended my breastfeeding. From that time on my daughter had more and more frequent bottles until 3 months when my milk supply had dwindled and she was completely bottle fed.

In hindsight I think the child health nurse should not have recommended me to introduce formula. My daughter had been gaining weight well and it should have taken more than one week of slow gain before my supply was considered to be low. I appreciate that she was probably trying to help me deal with an unsettled baby but maybe I just needed support in knowing that her behaviour was normal, rather than blaming feeding and my milk supply as the cause of her behaviour.

As a first time mother I was particularly vulnerable to worry and felt I did not know what the right thing to do was when I was told my baby was not gaining enough weight. I think I would have been more 'successful' at breastfeeding if I had had more knowledge of the benefits of breastfeeding and more support encouraging me to persevere. I don't remember being advised to contact the ABA or a lactation consultant, which probably would have been appropriate in the circumstances and may have helped me to breastfeed for longer.

Being told that I did not have enough milk to feed my baby had me in tears on many occasions. I found this experience extremely emotional and upsetting and am sure that it contributed towards my later feelings of anxiety and inadequacy as a mother.

I made a serious attempt to educate myself with my second daughter and have had a much more successful breastfeeding relationship, recently weaning her at 6 months. I was also advised to start topping her up with formula at less than two weeks old as she had not made the 'required' weight gains (although she was gaining steadily). I did not, however, do this at the time as I was satisfied within myself that she was a content baby and not hungry. I think the reliance on numbers and weights is sometimes adhered to too strongly and there appears to be little flexibility among many health professionals for babies that gain weight differently.

My second daughter has in fact been complementary fed with formula since three and a half months of age as a result of a health issue, but I am happy that she was exclusively breastfed for the first few months and that when we introduced formula it was for a reason and I had more understanding of what the consequences were likely to be. If I have another baby I will utilise all the support that I now know is available and hope that I will breastfeed for a longer time.

I think my experience shows that even though health professionals may mean well, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on the benefits of breastfeeding. Effort needs to be put in to helping women achieving this rather than deciding it is too hard and to put the babies on formula. Increased education and awareness campaigns for both health professionals and expectant/new mothers would be a good way to address this as in my experience the early months of motherhood are extremely trying; women need support to continue doing things that may seem hard at the time but are ultimately for the best. Women need to be able to access support services easily. The ABA offers a wonderful service, but home visits by midwives and lactation consultants would also be extremely beneficial (these can currently be expensive to obtain).

I have only very briefly discussed my experiences here as I wanted to send something in before the closing date. It is an issue I feel very strongly about as it coloured my own experience of motherhood so deeply. I feel I have had a much more positive experience the second time around as I had more knowledge of breastfeeding issues and was prepared to do what I believed was right.