

Fully Breastfeeding Amber after Latching-On Problems

Amber was born on New Years Eve 2001, at home, in the water under a beautiful, full-moon sky. Everything went as planned and Amber had her first breastfeed half an hour after birth. Amber and I bonded instantly and I knew that I wanted to breastfeed her as it was best for her health. It's natural and comforting and what better way to show my baby how much I love her.

I had read breastfeeding books and talked to my midwife, Heather, about feeding and thought that I was prepared. The first few days Amber fed quite well and I was starting to get the hang of it, Heather had explained to me that breastfeeding is a skill that has to be learned and that Amber and I were teaching each other.

Around day three, things started to go wrong and I couldn't latch Amber on properly, so my nipples were being grazed. The next day, when Heather came to see us she told me to make absolutely sure that Amber's mouth was opening wide and to make sure she was getting enough breast in her mouth. She also said that if it hurt me, to take Amber off and try again, (and again and again...) until it didn't hurt and felt comfortable. I found that every time Heather was present Amber would latch on well and we had really good feeds, but I couldn't get it right all the time and it was when Heather wasn't there that I was having real problems.

After about a week my nipples were sore and a bit damaged though no worse. In week or two everything went down hill really fast. My nipples got badly damaged and Amber wanted to feed all the time with only an hour or so rest in between. When Amber latched on, it hurt so badly that I would get a very intense pain right up my arm and into my elbow and shoulder. My toes would curl up and tears usually followed.

My letdown was being affected because I was so tense and I could never relax due to the pain, which then led to supply worries. I was getting very distressed so I rang Heather again and she came to see us. She was really surprised how in a matter of 48 hours my nipples could get so damaged. They went from moderate damage to extreme damage almost over night, (although it felt a lot longer than that at the time).

We decided, after much deliberation, to use nipple shields for a while to protect my nipples from further damage and to hopefully give them a chance to heal. Heather told me to let the shields do their job then throw them away before I got too dependant on them, because long term use can effect supply. The shields were lifesavers, it still hurt when the nipple got sucked through the shield but it helped Amber and I get it right.

The next step was to get my supply back up so we got some lactogogue tea, lots of food, snacks, water, rest and breastfeeding. It was working. We were

getting there, life was a little better and the tears were less. Amber was not gaining as much weight as we would have liked, but we had sorted out some major problems and were confident that great progress had been made. We were on the way up and Amber was a happy alert baby.

Then other members of the family became concerned about Amber's weight. They said that she needed formula, that I should get my milk tested (because it was not good enough), and because my sister couldn't breastfeed maybe I couldn't either, and that Amber would get Cystic Fibrosis etc, etc. The last straw was when they told us that since Amber could not speak they would have to be her voice. This really hurt and upset us, and all the great progress we had made recently went straight down the toilet. I started feeling really guilty, that I wasn't a very good mother, and that I had failed. The emotional pressure was huge so back came the tears and a small dose of depression just to top it all off as out came the formula.

Knowing how determined I was to breastfeed Amber, Heather expressed her concerns about the fact, that, if I gave up now after all the hard work that I might regret it later. I totally agreed. We started supplementing Amber with two bottles a day. It was very hard to do. I thought that once I started that would be it and the formula would take over. I was determined not to let this happen. Heather told me to make sure to express when Amber had formula and feed this to her as well to get some good weight gains. Family pressure was still major, so it was suggested that we go to see a paediatrician to get Amber checked. Heather and I knew Amber was fine but we agreed a checkup might help put all our minds at rest.

I was dreading going to the paediatrician and thought he was going to tell me to give up breastfeeding altogether, (actually it was quite the contrary). I explained everything to him and then he checked Amber. He said she was fine and gave me a few things to look out for. He was very pro breastfeeding and told me to keep doing as I was and to drop the formula when I was comfortable. He told me to feed Amber on demand, which was what I was doing anyway. He also said to try not to listen to what other people think is right for Amber and he was more than happy to talk to family about their concerns. I felt like a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders and, more so, my mind.

Life was still pretty hard and there was so much pressure and stress in getting my nipples healed, supply up and feeding going properly. Michelle, my student midwife, suggested La Leche League and got Debbie's number for me. I rang Debbie and explained everything to her and she gave lots of help, information, encouragement and support. Debbie suggested switch nursing for a couple of days to help give my supply a real boost. It really worked and Amber was doing better with lots more dirty nappies. My nipples were now healed and it was time to get rid of the shields. It was scary but I knew it was time. I started feeding every second feed without the shield, as my nipples were still a little sore. After a few days I became more confident and gave the shields back to Heather. It was a great day. My milk supply then picked right up and can you believe it I was even leaking!

Heather visited an extra week to make sure our girl was still having weight gains, lots of wet and dirty nappies and to make sure I was a happy mum. The last visit was sad because Heather had become my friend and her support was just amazing. Her last written words in our birth story were:

“Your strength and determination to do what you believe is right for Amber is amazing, you have a beautiful, healthy daughter, enjoy every moment of what you have worked so hard to achieve. Arohanui, Heather.”

At 11 weeks out went the formula and Amber was a happy, healthy, fully breastfed baby. We had made it. It was the most rewarding goal I had ever achieved and I am so proud that I stuck to my beliefs. I went to my first La Leche League Meeting when Amber was four months old and couldn't believe the amount of support I got from other mothers and a great bunch of Leaders. I have made some new friends and I am enjoying going to meetings and hopefully helping someone else feel supported.

Sometimes I feel sad when I think about the first few weeks but actually writing my story has helped a lot and made me feel proud that I didn't give up.

I want to say a huge thanks to: Heather for all her help, love, support, friendship, extra visits and phone calls; Debbie for all her help over the past two years and for introducing me to LLL; and my husband who stood right by my side every step of the way. Thank you so much.

I have learnt a great deal over the past two years and now have the knowledge to look forward to breastfeeding again early in 2004. I now know where to go for support. I can only remind myself that the negative things have turned positive through being introduced to LLL.

Leanne Kennedy, Cambridge
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