

"Old Iron Jaws"

My baby's jackhammer-like chomping at my breasts was painful -- but it was too much advice, not the pain, that almost made me give up nursing.

I assumed nursing would come easily to me; when it didn't just "happen", I assumed I was doing something obvious, wrong. I didn't know my problem was unusual. I sought advice from the nurses at the hospital; of course OB professionals know a lot about breastfeeding. After all, what is there to know?

They had lots of suggestions, but none helped me. It was probably good advice -- for the average mom with the average baby. The nurses dismissed my worries about how Jared could feed if he were chomping rather than swallowing. They assured me that he was just sucking hard -- even though I thought he wasn't sucking at all. "He'll figure it out in a day or two; they always do," they told me. With the nurses brushing off my concerns, I soon didn't trust my feelings either. Then, as different nurses' suggestions began to contradict each other, I grew confused. It seemed to me that the only reason I wasn't succeeding was because I was incompetent; I'd never felt this unable to cope before.

When I went home 3 days after Jared was born, I felt even more inept. The nurses assured me it would come together in a few days. How many was "a few"? They told me that I had "good nursing technique". Yet Jared hadn't latched successfully and drank sugar water to prevent dehydration -- and nursing really hurt. Who would have guessed that it would take 10 more weeks of pain and sleeplessness, of self-doubt and resentment of myself, my husband, my medical providers, and almost of my baby?

Nearly everyone assumed it was *my* problem that we couldn't nurse. "You'll get it," they told me. Only one friend understood. She nicknamed my baby "Old Iron Jaws". She had never forgotten the pain she experienced when, 13 years ago, she had helped another mom nurse a chomping infant. She encouraged me to hire a lactation consultant, to substitute a professional for the supportive and knowledgeable community that I lacked. I needed the wisdom gleaned from generations -- or from thousands of women's experiences.

I became more despondent as each of the lactation consultant's suggestions in turn failed. But her observations helped me to stick with it. Strangely, when she said that easy nursing sometimes takes as long as three months, my distress diminished. I no longer felt like the odd mom out. The encouraging "a few days" the nurses at the hospital mentioned probably helped many, many women... but it had made me feel like a failure for missing the deadline.

Yet the consultant said it wasn't my fault. I had been right; it was my baby, not my body, that had a problem. Jared couldn't suck if he was chomping. He wasn't "figuring it out", as the nurse had assured me he would. I wasn't incompetent; my baby's hard-wiring for nursing had blown a fuse. He needed to learn to suck, just as some other babies need to learn to sleep at night. After an eternity of several days, Jared sucked at least as often as he chomped. He ate less supplemental formula.

But being "right" didn't compensate for the incredible pain that Jared's jaws still caused. I dreaded each feeding; every muscle in my body would tighten up, anticipating the next chomp. Soon every part of me hurt. I desperately wanted a rest, but I feared Jared would never go back to the breast if I stopped nursing. The lactation consultant gave me the permission I needed to take time off. Jared wouldn't lose interest in nursing in a few days. And since I fed him pumped milk, he wouldn't lose the benefits of my milk either. The physical relief was enormous. But my husband, meaning well, "checked" to see if I had nursed each day. That brought back the old feeling of incompetence and almost drove me to give up altogether. It never occurred to him that I felt inadequate. The lactation consultant gently encouraged me not to try again until I was ready. She helped me broaden my image of a "good" mother as one who does what's best for both herself and her baby. As they say on the airplane, adjust your own oxygen mask, then your child's.

After I healed, I nursed only when Jared's jaws were loosest, in the morning. I pumped between his feedings, but now Jared ate almost every hour, for about a half hour. This situation was intolerable, too, and it seemed endless. Despite knowing I had made progress, I still hurt a little, and now I felt like a machine. I hadn't had one of those great "bonding experiences" that everyone told me about. I hated the whole business.

And now even my lactation consultant gave me too many suggestions that didn't work. She and my nurse practitioner wanted me to try all sorts of changes -- tubes, diet, and so on. I rebelled. I could give no more without resenting my baby. So I fixed my sights on the 3-month "deadline". I would do nothing new until then, when I'd see if time would indeed work its wonders on Jared's jaws.

I did make one important change my husband suggested. Ignoring all the positions we knew about, I gave Jared control by sitting him upright on my thigh, his hand on my breast. This little change was a big breakthrough. He latched... and barely chomped.

After Jared briefly refused to nurse -- my fear that he was weaning himself so soon brought me to tears for the first time in the 8-week ordeal -- he decided to refuse the bottle. Jared hasn't had a bottle since that incredible 10th week.

Now, at 7 months, Jared is teething, and he's beginning to eat solid foods. "Old Iron Jaws" chomps on me once in a while, when he's upset or very tired, but he stops quickly. I want to keep nursing him at least for 9 months, but he, not I, will make that decision. I'm not getting my hopes up because it was my hopes and expectations that first brought trouble.

Where were the stories that could have prepared me for this ordeal? Everyone had told me their labor stories, so I knew my labor, while difficult, was "normal". But my friends didn't tell me their nursing troubles because, they said, if I knew how hard it could be sometimes, I'd never have tried. Yet more stories would have kept me from feeling so alone in my journey. Perhaps my story will help you. I escaped postpartum depression; we could all do without the lactation blues.