

Satisfying the Needs of the Baby

Mothering through breastfeeding is the most natural and effective way of understanding and satisfying the needs of the baby.

When I think of what is entailed in mothering, I think of loving the baby – of caring for the baby physically, emotionally and spiritually. It wasn't that I thought I couldn't mother by bottle-feeding; it simply seemed that breastfeeding was so clearly what Hannah needed and what I was preprogrammed to do.

'Mothering through breastfeeding'. One of the very obvious things that strikes me about the phrase is how inextricably linked, physiologically, breastfeeding and pregnancy are, in that the body starts preparing for breastfeeding as soon as the woman becomes pregnant. Nothing could be more natural and to not breastfeed is to go against nature. Similarly, the development of the baby's sucking reflex in utero and its rooting instinct prepare it to be mothered through breastfeeding. It also is the only thing that only I can do, short of a wet nurse, which seems to me to point to its being at the heart of mothering the baby. It was also the only thing I knew I could (eventually) do well by virtue of simply being Hannah's mother and that was a huge comfort to me. I was taken aback at how strong my determination to breastfeed was – my belief that it was absolutely essential for Hannah's well-being and that I would persist no matter how painful it was. Perhaps this was hormonally influenced. That Hannah knew exactly how to extract the milk she wanted, cracked or inverted nipples or not seemed miraculous to me.

That breastfeeding is an effective way of meeting the needs of the baby seems to be proved by the fact that a baby survives and thrives on nothing more than breast milk for at least its first six months. Even though I had early difficulties with breastfeeding Hannah regained her birth weight quickly and has had few ailments.

As far as understanding the needs of the baby is concerned, breastfeeding Hannah reinforced and enhanced the bond between us even though in the worst moments of the early days it felt at times as though it was weakening it. When breastfeeding started to go well for us, the bond became much stronger on my side. It was a continuation of the physical and emotional connectedness that had begun in pregnancy.

With regards to satisfying the needs of the baby, the let-down reflex when the baby cries seems significant. The mother's body doesn't distinguish between physiological and emotional needs. That Hannah stopped crying when I breastfed her confirmed to me (rightly or wrongly) that her needs were being satisfied. I'm not sure that my understanding of those needs progressed much beyond that, especially around the stomach upsets, but the contentment that breastfeeding brought Hannah when she was distressed was and continues to be tangible. It wasn't that we didn't try other methods to comfort her when she was crying with her stomach ructions. We walked up and down for hours, sang soothingly, drove for miles. Nothing else worked for any length of time.

It would seem logical that breastfeeding on demand helps the baby to trust its own instincts and environment and that trust must help the baby to feel secure in itself and in the world. Conversely, if the baby cries - to express a need in the only way it can - and is ignored, then it would seem logically to lead to a distrust of the baby's carers and environment. The psychological need for security, that knowing one is loved, seems to be met at least partly through breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding satisfies the physiological needs and seems also to meet the psychological needs of the baby. Nutritionally, it is unsurpassed; it provides immunological protection and the physical closeness of skin-to-skin contact.