

The Normal Course of Breastfeeding

Your baby doesn't act the way the books told you to expect! Who's right? The baby or the books?

Babies are adaptable. You may be able to "bend" your baby's behavior to fit your favorite book. But your baby is the way she is because that's the way babies have always been. Here's what seems to have been "normal" for human mammals for thousands and thousands of years:

Normal pregnancy did not involve large amounts of many of today's allergic foods. If your baby's family has strong allergic tendencies, you may do well to avoid dairy products, eggs, and perhaps peanuts, at least during the third trimester. There is evidence that avoiding them then and during early breastfeeding can help your child avoid a sensitivity to them.

Normal birth took place in a quiet, secluded place where the mother felt at ease. It did not involve labor drugs, which interfere with a baby's ability to nurse and interact normally. It probably included an experienced woman, or "doula", who "mothered the mother" during the labor. Research indicates that hospital birth is no safer than midwife-attended home birth for the average woman, and that an epidural is no more effective than a doula in keeping her comfortable.

Normal postpartum connections occurred without the baby being taken from the mother at all. Within the first hour - but probably not immediately - the baby began to seek the breast. After nursing for perhaps an hour or more, baby and mother rested together for a number of hours. Then the baby began nursing again, probably spending most of his time at breast for the first few days. Because the mother knew from long observation how to hold a baby for nursing, she was unlikely to feel pain. Pain is a signal that something needs fixing.

Normal mothering involved carrying the baby during the day and sleeping with the baby at night. No wheels, no cribs, no separate room, just the warmth of her body and the presence of her milk. Mothers continued their work with frequent quick nursings - probably several an hour, lasting a few minutes each, usually using only one breast each time. Babies were not expected to last 2 and 3 and 4 hours, and were usually neither starved nor stuffed but in some happy place in between. Indeed, the notion that 2 hours is an average time between nursings is based in wishful thinking, not human biology. Some babies can wait that long, some will gain poorly and wean early if feedings are 2 hours or more apart. (Nursing more often is usually both more fun and easier for mom, just as taking occasional short breaks at work is less disruptive and more restful than having only one long break in the middle of a long workday.) All of a baby's sucking provided calories - no stalling the baby with a pacifier that fails to offer food - and newborns spent a lot of time nursing. On the other hand, a baby who wants to suck all the time and never leaves the breast seeming satisfied may not be getting milk effectively; someone knowledgeable about breastfeeding needs to take a look.

Normal weaning probably occurred somewhere between 2 1/2 and 7 years of age. That means that a one-year-old's body, bones, and personality are geared for a diet of mostly breast milk, not mostly solids. Nursings tapered off so gradually that often neither mother nor child knew exactly when the final nursing happened. Normal nursing was pleasant - for both mother and baby. Otherwise, why would she have bothered? If it isn't fun, check with a breastfeeding specialist. You both deserve to enjoy it!