

Adventures in breastfeeding

She lactated, she fed, she conquered. But was the victory sweet? **Camille Gray** reflects on her experience of breastfeeding



Camille, her breasts and baby all survived the adventure intact

Breastfeeding was a challenge. I had to learn how to hold the baby, how to help her latch. When I gave birth, I separated into four. The baby, me, the left boob and the right. All in a relationship, learning about one another. The baby had to learn how to feed. I had to learn how to hold the baby, how to help her latch.

The first feed was a miracle. I stared as my 30-minute-old girl latched onto my breast. The midwife exclaimed, "What a good sucker!" My baby stayed for 40 minutes, suckling away. I felt awed.

The contractions returned. I winced while the milk flowed. The strange yellow colostrum made my baby drunk, so I got some sleep.

Day number three, still in hospital; horrific night. Baby unsettled as the milk 'came in'. She jerked her head back, my nipple still in her mouth. The next day I had porn-star boobs and there was milk everywhere.

My mother said that in Paris in the 1970s, breastfeeding was considered animalistic and unscientific. She watched with interest and announced it looked too hard. I understood why breastfeeding mothers need support.

"The French are dreadful breastfeeders," my nurse said. "They're not patient enough, and too worried about losing the look of their boobs."

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I marvelled at my body's abilities. I fed in my sleep, while my baby grunted and sighed with contentment. Her arms reached out – because of me, and what my body produced for her. I stroked her cheek, held her hand, and she opened her eyes and gazed at me.

But breastfeeding was tiring. I had no other life. Keeping track of the boobs was tiring. I got sore nipples. The advice from professionals and books seemed dramatic, so I ignored them and listened to my boobs instead. I alternated between a nipple shield, a breast pump and some formula. My sore boobs smiled in gratitude and I got some sleep.

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Then my milk flow reduced. I decided to consult a Chinese doctor and drank the suggested lactation tea – fennel, caraway seeds, fenugreek and something else. Like a curry. Very fragrant. It worked a treat. Niagara Falls once more.

I felt proud for overcoming these problems. I dared to breastfeed in public: in shopping centres, on buses. Everyone coped. Old ladies beamed. One woman marvelled that I could breastfeed and eat with chopsticks.

Aims of the game

I aimed for six months of exclusive breastfeeding, as recommended by the World Health Organization. Who was I to argue with WHO? Then someone said 12 months of breastfeeding is better. So that was my new aim.

But that meant juggling expressing milk and returning to work. I could try to negotiate all my meal breaks in

one block, if I wrote a letter stating that I needed to perform a 'bodily function'. I elected to throw away the pump and to go to the childcare centre for one feed, and my baby would get formula for the other. It worked well, though one memorable day I was stung by a bee during a feed.

My baby grew teeth and started to bite. What betrayal. I rang the Breastfeeding Association and was presented with two options: I could

continue or I could wean. Fortunately, my baby developed a cheeky glance that announced her intention to bite, so I heeded the warning and took her off.

My victory dance

Eventually, my baby refused the lunchtime boob and, on her first birthday, she dropped the other two. She weaned herself. It's over. I did a victory dance in the lounge room, waving my boobs at my baby and partner. "They're mine! My body's mine! Mine, mine, mine!!!" Amused baby, bemused partner.

I did it. I met my target of one year. So why did I want to cry? I felt sad, rejected. I'm relieved it ended amicably but I have a mental picture of the milk in the boobs, waiting to be consumed. Could my baby change her mind?

It seems my baby is now independent. My baby is now one. And so am I. The boobs remain two.