

What's so hard about it? By Nadirah P.

Breastfeeding? 'What's so hard about it?' I thought.

That was before I gave birth.

After I gave birth by emergency C-section to a lovely baby girl who weighed a grand total of 1.136kg at birth (that's another story altogether), I thought I'd never be able to sit up and breastfeed. As my baby was in Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), I did not have to worry about getting up. I knew that all I had to do was to get this newfangled machine to attach itself to my breasts and milk would start pouring out. Wrong. I still had to get up for the milk to flow out of the funnel and into the bottle. So, I struggled to get up and sit up. It wasn't easy but I kept on telling myself that thousands and thousands of women had gone through Caesarean sections and managed to breastfeed their babies and so, I can too.

So I did. My maiden attempt at expressing my milk got me a respectable 50ml of what looked suspiciously like mango juice. Ooh. I was proud of myself. And thus begun my pumping career. After I was discharged, I continued expressing every three hours and I was rewarded with a good amount each time. The amount of milk I expressed three-hourly was more than what my daughter was given in a day. My daughter, who was still in NICU and later Special Care Nursery (SCN) was being fed small amounts every two hours through a feeding tube. How small an amount? On the second day of her life, she was given 1ml every two hours. That slowly increased as the days passed.

By the end of the first week, I noticed that she was making sucking motions with her mouth but the nurses told me that bottle-feeding normally starts when the child hits the 1.5kg mark. So, my petite one still had to be fed through the tube.

Throughout her entire time at the hospital, I diligently pumped and pumped. As weeks passed, she started bottle feeding twice daily and once she was completely off the feeding tube, nurses at the hospital encouraged me to breastfeed her.

The teat of the bottle is very different from the human nipple and my daughter refused me. It was emotionally challenging but I was prepared for the rejection as I had been reading up quite a bit on babies like my daughter. At the hospital, I tried to breastfeed her about five times (only!) and out of the five times, only the second one was successful. The rest of the time, my baby would just wail non-stop and I had to give in and give her the bottle.

The time eventually came when she was ready to be discharged. It was a very exciting time for both my husband and I.

I was determined for her to latch on but I was not ready to face her screams that evening so I gave her expressed milk in the evening. For the night feeds, I decided that I would try to latch her on – come what may. I warned my family members to be ready for the screams and I did not thaw any expressed milk.

That night, she woke up only about 428 times (that's what it felt like). I knew she was very hungry and all she was getting was the foremilk that was dripping from my engorged breasts. She still could not latch on. The next day, was still the same. I gave in a couple of times and gave her expressed milk. I tried to make her latch on and drink milk straight from the source but she refused. My sister tried to help by pushing her head towards my breast. That worked once but it didn't work again after that.

It was a truly frustrating time but knowing that the problem was not a unique problem helped. I refused to label it as 'nipple confusion'. All I know is that I absolutely must persist.

I cannot remember when exactly she started taking to the breast but it was about 4 to 5 days after she was discharged. Even so, she preferred the left side to the right side.

Two weeks after she was discharged, I decided that she must learn to take to both sides. So, once again, I had to apply the same tactics – persistence. Having had the experience before, I knew it could be done. For one entire day, I expressed the milk from the left side and just feed her exclusively from the right side. Within a day, she could feed from both sides with no problems.

Everything was fine and dandy for a while – even when I went back to work because my senior and middle management as well as my colleagues were supportive of mothers expressing milk at work.

Then, a stubborn lump which refused to go away necessitated a biopsy. My right breast would be out of commission for a few days. Still I had to express milk out (to maintain supply) and discard the milk as it contained blood. Yes, blood. It was really quite distressing seeing blood – instead of milk - coming out from the nipple. At one point, it became so bad that I couldn't even look at the funnel. My milk looked like a Bandung drink. My husband had to hold the funnel, discard

the milk and clean up everything so that I would not see anything.

Eventually, the strawberry milk stopped flowing and normal breastfeeding resumed.

It's been almost 5 months since I started breastfeeding. Has it been easy? Far from it. I am grateful for every day that I get to supply milk to my baby. I give myself small targets so as to avoid any big disappointments. Presently, my target is 6 months – the minimum standard set by WHO. If I reach that, my next target is 7 and half months of breastfeeding, which is when my baby is actually 6 months old based on her corrected age. My eventual target is to breastfeed for at least 2 years but I shall not think about that now.

For now, I am thankful for each day that milk flows.

Written 5 August 2006 (from WBW2006 blog)

© BMSG (Singapore)