

When to Wean the Baby

By Patty Wipfler, Founder, HandinHand Parenting



How do you know when to wean your child?

When you ask your friends and family when to wean, you'll get advice that ranges from "Any time you want after the first few months," to "Your child should make that decision, not you, even if he's still nursing at three- or four-years old."

I don't think anyone can or should make the decision when to wean for you. But information about how the weaning process can go, and the benefits of that process, may be helpful in making a decision that becomes an expression of your love.

Because nursing involves an intimate relationship that deeply affects both you and your child, it's good for you to have a lot of say in how that relationship goes. If you're nursing but tired of it, resentful, or pregnant with another child, the strain on you could affect your non-nursing moments and hours.

Your child might be continuing a relationship she treasures, but not really getting the best of you. And, in my view, part of a parent's job is to get the help, and make the decisions, that protect her energy for the whole parenting relationship.

Good reasons to think about when to wean are that you're not able to enjoy the nursing relationship any longer, not able to keep up your strength, or that sleep deprivation from night nursing is draining your enjoyment of parenting. (I'll make an important exception here for the first three or four months of a child's life, when night nursing is absolutely necessary, and when children benefit so greatly from the health advantages of nursing. During these months, support from others during the day so you can nap will be helpful!)

Wean slowly, and give your child an outlet for her feelings.

If you were to decide to wean, I recommend doing it slowly if you can. Children have lots of feelings that become attached to nursing, and they benefit from a process that will give them time to grieve the loss of nursing. If you wean quickly, a child feels scared but doesn't have the safety to process her feelings. When the change is sudden, a child will bury some of her feelings in order to manage the change. To keep those feelings at bay, she'll adopt behaviors like thumb-sucking or hair-twirling, to distract herself from that emotional load.

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If you go slowly, you have the chance to listen to your child's feelings day by day until they're really gone. Your overall goal is to offer your child 100% of your affection and attention, but not the breast, making sure that her tummy is full enough. She will let you know if it's hard for her.

Because you are offering connection, and she is doing her job of communicating her feelings, her affection for you will stay intact. But the "I can't make it without a nursing" desperation will melt away with many good cries in your loving arms.

Begin with one feeding a day

I would suggest, as a first step, **paying attention to the feelings your child has about "needing" to nurse for one feeding a day.** Let's say you choose the feed that your child uses to fall asleep at night. She may be using nursing as a way to handle leftover feelings from the day that don't let her settle in to sleep. So, for this step, you won't challenge her feelings of needing to nurse. You will, as a first step, challenge the feelings she has that she can't sleep without nursing. One issue at a time!

You tell your child that tonight, you're going to nurse her earlier, and that you'll help her go to sleep without nursing. You need give the respect of letting a child know that you intend to make a change before you do it.

Then, do just that. **Pay your child full attention while you nurse her.** She may zone out while nursing. Most children, after many months of nursing, do often zone out. They go to a habitual place of "comfort." Most moms do too—it becomes a time to take a mental break. But for this work, you'll need to pay attention to her for the entire nursing. Offer her eye contact, and communicate that you enjoy her.

But don't let her go to sleep nursing. Stop her when it's clear she's had enough, and if she's dozing, wake her enough so that she knows she's going to bed. Then lie down next to her and offer warmth and connection. Offer both eye contact and physical contact. But don't nurse.

If she needs to cry about going to sleep this way, listen, reassure, be present. That's what she needs from you. The feelings that come out are feelings she's had stored for awhile, feelings that **nursing** has comforted back into some corner of her emotional memory.

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No nursing to sleep means that she doesn't have a way of avoiding those feelings now. With your help, she gets to clear them out. You offer support and love. She'll do the emotional scrubbing.

If you're worried that she might be hungry, offer her a cup of milk at some point in her cry. If she's actually hungry, she'll take it. Most likely, the offer will intensify her feelings that she needs to nurse. Listen. She's taking care of old emotional business. Listen until she can fall asleep.

The things you can say now and then are something like this:

- *I'm right here for you, sweetheart.*
- *You have everything you need.*
- *I'm watching over you every minute.*
- *It's safe to go to sleep. I'm right here to be with you.*
- *I know this is hard. You can nurse again tomorrow.*
- *I will stay with you.*
- *We'll nurse again in the morning.*
- *I won't go away. Here's my hand. It's right on your back.*
- *You're doing a good job. I'm right with you.*

You're not withholding your attention.



You're not withholding your love. You're not withholding closeness and intimacy. Pour as much of yourself toward your little one as you can. You're just withholding an activity that tamped down her emotions. She'll be gaining a fuller sense of confidence as her feelings are shed.

You won't see this until the next day, or maybe the next week if she's really attached to nursing to sleep,

and needs to cry many times. But you will see developmental and personality leaps that will reassure you that she's doing just fine, thanks to your good attention.

When you have nursing separated from her ability to fall asleep, then it's time to help her further with her feelings that she *has* to nurse.

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Your child's feelings may have been mounting for months.

During the early months of a child's life, we sometimes feed a child when what the child was signaling was the need to cry about a feeling he or she had. The nursing—the concentration they apply to it and the “zoning out” they do—serve to distract the child from her emotions, and the feeling seems to go away. But the feeling goes into storage, instead.

Sometimes, it's that collection of stored feelings that nursing tamped down is the cause of extended nighttime waking to feed. The child can't relax for long with that load of feelings so uncomfortably stored. There's no way to avoid missing an infant's signals at least some of the time. So it's almost inevitable that your child will feel frantic to nurse, not just when she's hungry, but also when she's managed stored feelings for as long as she could.



Nursing doesn't cure stored feelings. Crying, laughter and tantrums dissolve them, as long as a supportive listener is there to anchor the child while her emotional seas are stormy.

As you slowly wean, you're going to be the steady voice and presence saying that all is safe. You will provide a healing opportunity. It's an opportunity to add fuller awareness when you do nurse, for awhile, and to give full attention when you don't.

You're gradually pulling back from nursing as a habit you and your child have fallen in to, that offers physical closeness but less than full connection, because either you or your child is zoning out just to get to the other side of the interaction. You're giving your child an opportunity to let her work through all those little times when she felt scared, separate, or desperate for attention.

When one nursing habit has vanished, tackle another.

Help your child to drink milk or eat instead of one of the regular feeds he depends on from you. You can tackle one habitual nursing at a time: perhaps the nursing to sleep, at first, then the first middle-of-the-night waking. When your child is sleeping until 4 a.m., then that nursing. Then, the unscheduled bids to nurse that arise from little dashes in your child's confidence during the day. You'll figure out the pace that makes sense, and give your child a better chance to choose to wean, if you're gradually sorting out aware interactions from the “help me soothe my fears” interactions, cry by cry.

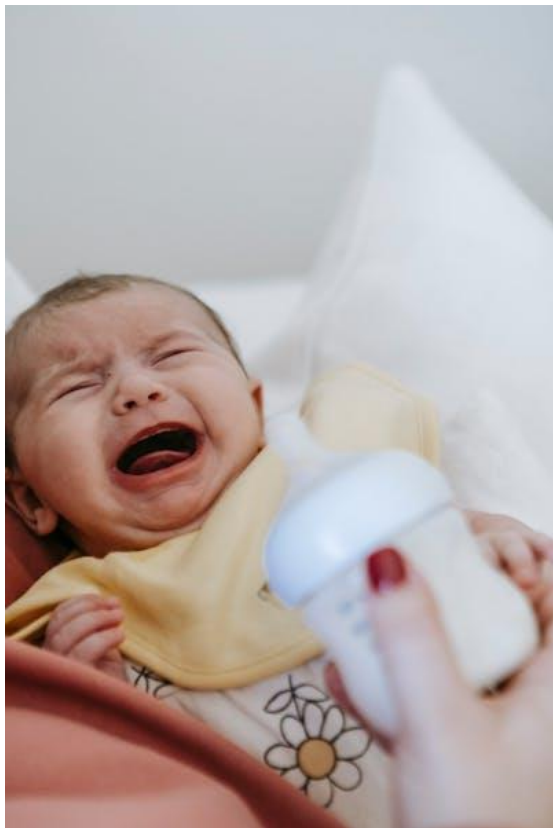
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Your child will let you know if she's hungry or thirsty.



When you're not sure whether your child is actually hungry or thirsty, offer water (best for helping her system get used to sleeping through the night) or milk in a cup at some point during her cry.

If you're helping her meet her needs for emotional release of feelings, she'll cry harder and reject your offer. She has you. She has your love. She has closeness. She can lie in your arms. And she has an offer of something to drink. All her essential needs are met. You are meeting her need to offload feelings of dependency, desperation, loneliness.

You'll never know exactly what these feelings are about, but she'll show you everything she can. When she has finished crying them out with your help, she's going to be a more confident and sunny child.

Offer confidence, not pity.

While your child is protesting, she needs you to be with her, and confident. Children get their signals about whether real trouble is afoot from us, their parents. She's in the throes of feelings, so needs you to care, but not to fall all over her with sympathy—"Oh, you poor girl. This is so hard. Oh, I know it's awful, but we have to do it..."

That's not the situation. She's a lucky girl to have your love and attention. She's doing what she was built to do. She's having an "emotional poop." She's healing. She's feeling awful, but is making room in her emotional mind for a fuller sense of being loved. Emotional debris is making way for a sense of wellbeing.

Pace yourself

In slow weaning, you don't have to remain totally consistent about the times you offer nursing, and the times you don't. If you listen to your child one night fully, but the next night, just don't have the energy or attention to listen, nurse her, and tell her, "Sweetie, I am going to nurse you tonight. I'll listen to you another night, but tonight, I'm tired."

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She needs a certain amount of emotional release to sleep all night, but she doesn't need to gain that emotional release every single night in order for this process to work. When you can't be a listener, then just be as kind as you can. You can do this at your pace.

Find someone to listen to you.



Getting listening time for you will be important—no one can do a load of listening to a child's very raw emotions without being moved to acute feelings of their own. So you'll need some time and safety to cry about the end of nursing, or about how difficult parenting feels to you right now.

You'll want to choose someone

who can listen to your unvarnished feelings without telling you what to do or worrying at you. Find someone who can listen to you the way you are listening to your little one

Here's how it can work.

I have a friend with twins who, after a year of getting up to nurse two babies multiple times in the night, was ready to change things. For her sake and the sake of the children!

Her daughter, who experienced some birth trauma, was the one who cried very very hard and long about not being nursed in the night. She also was far more cautious, socially, than her twin, smiled far less, laughed less, moved away from people who weren't her mommy and daddy.

This mum listened, sometimes for 90 minutes in the middle of the night. Sometimes, Daddy would take the night shift, and listen. When she was the listener, her daughter would pound on her chest in fury, wail and cry, while being offered loving attention and reassurance, plus water in a cup.

Finally, after two or three weeks of fairly consistent middle of the night listening, she began to sleep for 12 or 13 hours straight. Victory! At the same time, she turned a huge corner in her functioning.

She is now social, smiles and laughs easily, comes toward people happily, and has a much stronger sense of herself and of safety in the world than she had before. I saw this little one a month ago, and again a few days ago, and the difference in her was startling and thrilling.

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The weaning process can benefit your child

I've seen this again and again. Once a child is past the first vulnerable months of life, getting a chance to release feelings of urgent need around nursing can bestow safety and confidence on a child. They have more of your love—all that you gave them while they cried—and less in



their emotional backpack to slow them down. And you have given your best, each time they've felt needy. You can sleep well, knowing that your love has reached them where and when they needed it.

Would you like some immediate help?

Sometimes it's hard to know where to start, or what to do when you meet a hurdle as you try to wean your child. Book a [Short Free Parenting Consultation](#), with Madeleine Winter, an experienced Parent Coach and Hand in Hand Expert Consultant. She can get a picture of your parenting challenges and point you in the direction of helpful resources and support.

Parenting is not something we were meant to do alone! You deserve help and support.

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