

A Mother's Instinct

Trish Whitehouse, Bobby's Mom

If there was one thing about raising a baby that I knew how to do, it was feed them. I had nursed three children and saw them follow a nice steady curve on the growth charts as I watched them reach all the crucial milestones. I had learned to love breastfeeding my children, attended every breastfeeding conference I could find to learn more, provided peer counseling to other breastfeeding mothers, had hopes of augmenting my RN degree with a lactation consultant certification and thought I didn't have much of anything else to learn about how to help a newborn thrive.

So when I was told that I could not breastfeed my child, and that he was intolerant of the fat in my milk because of a complication that occurred during his cardiac surgery, it was as if someone had just taken my last shred of parental control and thrown it to the wind. I felt like I got kicked in the stomach.

Having a child with a feeding tube, for me, was the ultimate insult. As a competent nursing mother, I had learned to nurture, console, quiet, comfort, feed and mostly love my children by breastfeeding. It was not just a form of food, it was a way of life for me. It was a means to an intimacy and form of bonding with my children that I had never dreamed of before my babies were born. To have that taken away, and replaced with a silicone feeding tube, feeding pump, numbers, measurements, times, amounts, and food from a can was akin to taking away my role as a mother and totally overriding my instincts. Those instincts that I had spent 12 years refining and honoring in myself. Those same instincts that I allowed to define who I was.

I knew I had to pump my milk for my baby. The complication requiring no fat milk was a temporary one, and for that time we devised a way to centrifuge my milk and remove the fat. After that acute time, Bobby could have full fat breastmilk, and I pumped around the clock for him as I would have nursed my other infants. But breastfeeding is much more than just food, so because I could no longer nurse him due to his extreme sensitivity to anything in his mouth, I had to find other ways to substitute for the things breastfeeding could do.

For example, many times my babies fell asleep cuddling and suckling at my breast. With a feeding tube and a child who was unable to suck, I had to find some other way to comfort him. That was the most difficult aspect of not being able to nurse him; now I did not have those easy means of comfort available to me. So at night, I used to put Bobby in a sling type carrier, and pace the living room floor, back and forth, over and over while I pushed the vacuum around for the white noise, with the feeding pump bag slung over my shoulder giving his continuous nutrition, all the while singing lullabies to my drowsy son. Although it

wasn't a cuddly baby nursing to sleep, it was the best I could do. Often I would take my shirt off just to give him the skin on skin closeness I knew babies thrive so well on during those first few weeks.

I pumped my milk for a very long time, and it was heartbreaking to me when my son used to projectile vomit all the precious milk it had taken me so long to pump. But I kept pumping because it gave me a purpose and a role in my son's nutrition. When Bobby was old enough, I began to feed him blended foods through his tube. I clearly remember the first time I put real food through his tube being one of the happiest days since he had the feeding tube.

When my other children were of an age when it was suggested that they try real foods, I remember taking great pride in mashing up that first banana and putting it up to their lips, anticipating what they would do with it and how they would accept this first taste of something other than breastmilk. Sometimes they were eager to try more, but most often they just played with it and made faces. I missed out on that part of motherhood with my tube fed son because he would not try anything by mouth which would not either make him gag or cause him to throw up.

So when I mashed up that first banana to put through the tube, and mixed it with my breastmilk, I was even more excited than with my other three healthy children. My role as a mother began to be clear again. I knew that I had an important role in feeding my child, and that I was now the expert instead of some manufacturer of a canned formula. My son tolerated that banana well, and the many foods I introduced after that day, and I was hooked on real food through the tube.

I began to get excited about going shopping, whereas before, the thought of feeding my son depressed me. I would go into the baby food aisle and look at the new foods they had conjured up since my other children had been born, and look for ideas on what to puree myself and feed my son through the tube. After a few months of introducing feeds slowly, one by one, and allowing a period of time to go by to see if he reacted in any negative way, I had quite an array of foods to feed him. I was actually having fun preparing his meals now...and I fed him like I would have my other healthy children. A little bit of cereal and breastmilk for breakfast, maybe a sandwich, some tofu and rice, fruit and a cookie for lunch, and a nice homecooked meal with vegetables, protein and carbohydrates for dinner. I didn't need to be a chemist, just a mother of four children who used her common sense to feed her family a healthy well balanced meal. I put what I would have liked Bobby to eat on his high chair, he'd play with it on a good day, then I would put it in a blender with enough breastmilk to thin it out, and feed it to him through his tube.

Bobby immediately reacted favorably to his new diet. The first improvement was that his blood iron level rose significantly, and we were able to stop his iron

supplement. His hair grew in thicker with a shiny blond color. He had more energy, and went from barely sitting up by himself at the age of one year to crawling the very next month after starting blended foods. His stools were healthier and less runny. His reflux decreased dramatically. But the best "improvement" from his real food diet was the change in his mother. I felt needed, intelligent, proud, and like a mother again. My instincts which had been so badly stifled because of having to feed my child through a tube were finally allowed to surface and be acknowledged. I practically danced my way through the aisles of the grocery store now, with my tube fed son and his optimal nutrition in the forefront of my mind. Not only could I love my son through my actions, but now I could show him I loved him through my food.

It might sound a little crazy, after all what does food have to do with love, but I think it is a vital component of every mother child relationship. Feeding our children and watching them thrive is the very first thing we can do for our helpless infants. They depend on us to act in their behalf and listen to our instincts. We listen to them cry and realize they are hungry. We nuzzle them close when they are feeding, and we kiss their foreheads many times while they are being nourished. We bond, we enjoy, we communicate and we express our deepest love. That is all taken away when the act of feeding is mechanical, technical, intimidating and distant, as it can be with a feeding tube.

My son is now 100% oral eater, and though I don't wish to go back to the tube feeding days, I do miss knowing that he is getting those well balanced, nutrient dense meals he was getting when I used to grind up the family's favorites. My other children used to help me pick out what we would feed Bobby through the tube, and they were always sure to give him a sweet treat at the end. I think that helped them see their little brother as a real person, and not some machine we fed some of that "stuff" into. It's easy to think that the other children in the family are not affected by the tube, but I remember my 5 year old asking me one day, obviously frightened and very seriously, "Mom, when am I going to have to have a tube?" But before I could reassure her that she probably would never need one, she continued, "...because he gets really good stuff through there!"

Trish Whitehouse, Bobby's Mom, 2003