

## CHAPTER SEVEN



*The Signals That Will Let You Know  
When to Feed Your Baby*

“I can’t tell when my baby is hungry.”

—JENNIFER

After ten years as a school guidance counselor, Jennifer felt ready to have a child of her own. Jennifer was accustomed to a busy workday; she took pride in her neatly organized office and always finished her reports before they were due. However, when Jennifer arrived home from the hospital with baby Elise, Jennifer entered an unfamiliar world of around-the-clock motherhood. As a new mother, she felt her work was never done. Elise seemed to need her all day and all night! There was barely enough time to shower let alone enjoy an afternoon coffee break. Jennifer was feeling overwhelmed when a girlfriend gave her a book that recommended mothers establish a strict schedule when feeding their babies. Jennifer decided to give it a try and began breastfeeding Elise every three hours and putting her in a crib for prescribed naps. Elise protested this regimen with fits of hysterical crying, especially when left alone in her crib. When offered one of her scheduled feedings, Elise was often too upset to breastfeed effectively. After a few days of this misery, Jennifer wasn’t sure if it was breastfeeding or the new schedule that wasn’t working.

It's easy to sympathize with Jennifer's frustration. As a professional goal-oriented woman, Jennifer was accustomed to being organized and finishing one task before beginning another. When Jennifer arrived home from the hospital with Elise, she may have had an easier time navigating the uncharted waters of new motherhood had she known that it takes time for mothers, babies, and breastfeeding to fall in sync. It is common for a new mother and her baby to experience an initial period of ambiguity, even chaos, as they become accustomed to each other. Thankfully, this period of confusion is self-limiting, and most mothers and babies fall seamlessly into step. This natural pattern of compatibility emerges over time, not overnight. Establishing a breastfeeding relationship takes patience and perseverance. Eventually, you and your baby will develop a unique pattern of feeding, resting, and sleeping. As Jennifer discovered, this natural rhythm becomes stifled when an artificial schedule is superimposed over the needs of you and your baby.

#### HOW DO WE BECOME A BREASTFEEDING TEAM?

The first few weeks are a time of exploration and adjustment as you and your baby become acquainted. Some mothers just seem to have an easier time accepting this ambiguity. Tia is an example of such a mother. I met Tia when her daughter Sasha was a week old. During our consultation, Sasha breastfed well, and Tia asked lots of questions about breastfeeding and baby care.

What impressed me most about Tia was her ability to appreciate the ambiguity of new motherhood. She was able to tolerate the lack of absolute answers during this transition time and allow the process of breastfeeding Sasha to unfold. "Sasha and I are getting breastfeeding started by spending lots of time relaxing together. I don't want to make any big plans until we get this figured out." During this time, Tia didn't overorganize her day or try to overanalyze Sasha's developing feeding and sleeping patterns. Rather, Tia spent time with Sasha and learned to recognize her

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hunger signals. As our visit drew to a close, I assured Tia that she would soon notice Sasha's natural pattern of feeding and sleeping.

Months later, I ran into Tia and Sasha on a shopping excursion. As Tia and I talked, Sasha gave me a big bright toothless smile. Rather than a difficult chore, Tia described breastfeeding as an effortless pleasure. She was now able to anticipate Sasha's hunger and noticed that her breasts became full of milk before feeding time. This connection continued even at night, and Tia would awaken a few moments before Sasha stirred in hunger. Tia happily remarked, "Sasha and I are a team!" As we said good-bye and I watched Tia walk away with Sasha in her arms, I couldn't help but think that they were much more than teammates. Tia and Sasha were true companions. This type of harmony can't be scheduled.

Tia was able to cultivate a high level of confidence in her ability to mother Sasha by giving herself time to get to know Sasha after she was born. Over time, she became adept at recognizing and responding to Sasha's signals. Sasha grew into a calm, friendly baby who thoroughly trusted Tia. Together, mother and daughter shared a rhythmic cycle of breastfeeding, satiety, and sleeping. Tia and Sasha's unique pattern for success cannot be scheduled.

### CAN I SCHEDULE BREASTFEEDING?

I enjoy wonderful working relationships with nearly every family that I meet, and over the years a few clients have become close friends. It is rare that I meet someone with whom I am unable to forge a bond. Not only was I unable to connect with Rochelle personally but I was unable to help her professionally because her style of mothering was not conducive to breastfeeding.

I met Rochelle after she was discharged from the hospital with her second son, Justin. Rochelle was having trouble getting breastfeeding started. The fact that Justin was smaller than her first baby and born by an unplanned cesarean section could explain Rochelle's difficulty, but it was her

allegiance to strict scheduling that was to blame for her breastfeeding troubles. When I arrived for our appointment, Rochelle informed me that she intended to train Justin to follow the same prescribed feeding and sleeping regimen that she instituted with her two-year-old son when he was a baby. Not wanting to waste any time, Rochelle had already begun indoctrinating five-day-old Justin to the plan.

As Rochelle spoke, Justin began to stir, and his tiny fingers were making their way toward his open mouth. I gently interrupted Rochelle and pointed out Justin's hunger signals and suggested that now would be an excellent time to begin breastfeeding. Rochelle balked and insisted on postponing the feeding until the scheduled time. For the remainder of the visit, I did my best to help Rochelle and Justin connect, but I felt my effort was futile. In the end, Rochelle placed her schedule above the needs of her infant son. After that visit, I did not hear from Rochelle again.

Babies respond to their inner sensations of hunger and experience stress when their hunger is not satisfied. Strict feeding schedules satisfy an adult's need for complete control over the process of parenting, but schedules do not satisfy an infant's need to be nurtured. Because breastfeeding is built on mutual trust, feeding schedules sabotage breastfeeding success. Rochelle obtained her schedule from a popular book, but many of my clients get similar scheduling advice from their pediatrician.

Lori had been exclusively breastfeeding her daughter Charlotte since birth. From early on, their breastfeeding relationship had been smooth and trouble-free. Lori had an abundant milk supply, and Charlotte was healthy and energetic. All was well until Lori took Charlotte to the pediatrician for a routine visit.

The pediatrician advised Lori to schedule Charlotte's feedings at three-hour intervals throughout the day. Over the preceding months, Lori and Charlotte had developed their own routine, which included multiple feedings especially in the late afternoon and evening. Most nights, Charlotte awakened to breastfeed and would quickly fall back to sleep. The pediatrician objected to these late-night feedings and stated that a baby Charlotte's

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age should not be fed during the night. After a few nights of crying, she would forget all about breastfeeding.

After returning home from the pediatrician's office, Lori's self-confidence was shaken. She was unsure about what to do and wanted to know what I thought about the doctor's regimen. I listened to Lori's concerns and then responded by asking Lori what she thought about the pediatrician's feeding schedule. After all, as Charlotte's mother, Lori was the expert. Nobody knows a baby better than the baby's own mother! Lori thought for a moment and replied that the restrictive schedule would make both of them miserable. Charlotte would cry in hunger, and Lori would be heartbroken hearing her daughter's desperate cries.

Although rigid feeding and sleeping schedules are still recommended by some doctors and nurses, they are based on formula-feeding guidelines not breastfeeding physiology. A newborn's stomach is about the size of his or her fist and designed for small frequent meals. These frequent feedings, especially during the night, serve to build a new mother's milk supply.<sup>1</sup> Limiting a baby's feedings can suppress a new mother's milk supply and cause a healthy baby to cry with hunger.

### SHOULD I BREASTFEED ON DEMAND?

Another popular school of thought dictates that new mothers feed their baby on demand instead of on a schedule. The inherent negativity implied by "demand" feed lingo makes me cringe nearly as much as baby-care schedules. A baby should never need to cry out in hunger, demanding to be fed. Additionally distasteful is the assumption that a mother is passively waiting around in servitude to the whims of her baby. In a breastfeeding relationship, a mother is neither a dictator nor a wallflower.

A mother actively participates in the development of a baby's feeding and sleeping pattern. For instance, Jamie planned to work from home and wanted to be fully available for a daily conference call between 11 A.M. and

noon. She purposely breastfed her daughter Lexie around ten thirty each morning so that Lexie would be satiated by 11 A.M., allowing Jamie to telecommute without interruption.

As you and your baby develop a unique pattern of daily life, notice your body's natural rhythm. If your breasts feel full of milk at a certain time each day, take advantage of your natural abundance by awakening your baby to breastfeed. It is important to remember that this daily pattern of hunger, feeding, and sleeping won't become recognizable until after the arrival of your mature milk and your baby's return to birth weight. To assure that this happens by two weeks of age, encourage your newborn to breastfeed frequently during the day as well as during the night.

#### HOW LONG SHOULD A FEEDING TAKE?

When I went to visit Jessica for a consultation, she seemed to have everything in order. Jessica had an excellent supply of milk, and her son, Coby, was gaining weight well. Yet, Jessica was worried that something was wrong with the way Coby was breastfeeding because he often breastfed for longer than ten minutes. Jessica's doctor had told her that after ten minutes her breasts were empty and that Coby "was using her as a pacifier." Like Jessica, almost all of my clients are concerned about the length of a feeding.

Contrary to what Jessica had been told, her breast was not completely empty after a specific number of minutes.<sup>2</sup> Because Jessica had cultivated a full milk supply, some breast milk was always available for Coby. She was relieved to learn that the high-fat milk Coby received near the end of a feeding, often referred to as *hind milk*, would help Coby to feel contented and promote his growth. Knowing that her breasts were never completely empty and that Coby's longer feeding style was normal enabled Jessica to relax and observe Coby instead of counting the passing minutes.

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### SHOULD MY BABY BREASTFEED FREQUENTLY AT NIGHT?

Betty was excited to become a grandmother for the first time. After her granddaughter, Avianna, was born, Betty dedicated herself to helping her daughter Jenna care for Avianna. When it came to breastfeeding, Betty felt at a loss because she had not breastfed. She was concerned that her granddaughter, Avianna, was breastfeeding too frequently during the night and interrupting Jenna's sleep. Based on her own experience as a formula-feeding mother, Betty advised her daughter to feed Avianna bottles of formula during the night instead of breastfeeding. Betty believed this would encourage her granddaughter to sleep through the night.

Betty's expectation that young babies should sleep for long blocks of time at night is based on a formula-feeding paradigm and not on breastfeeding physiology. Betty's well-intentioned plan would harm the development of Jenna's breastfeeding relationship with Avianna. It is, in fact, normal for Avianna to breastfeed frequently during the night. Contrary to what Betty thought, a young healthy baby like Avianna will be more awake during the night than during the day, and Avianna's frequent nighttime feedings will help Jenna to establish a strong milk supply. By substituting formula at night instead of breastfeeding, Jenna's milk supply will quickly dwindle. As Avianna grows and time passes, she will naturally sleep longer at night and spend more time awake during the day. Certainly, Jenna could gently help Avianna adjust her feeding and sleeping patterns by offering extra breastfeeding sessions during the day.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF A FEEDING IS PRODUCTIVE?

The passage of time does not gauge the success of breastfeeding. However, what happens during that time is very significant. Sometimes your baby may feed very effectively and receive a full feeding in just a few minutes. At other times, your baby may take longer to feel full and actively breastfeed for

forty-five minutes. The same is true for the interval of time between feedings. During a feeding cluster, your baby may need to breastfeed every hour; at other times, your baby may not feel hungry for several hours. Timed feedings and prefabricated schedules cannot be trusted to gauge the overall health of your breastfeeding relationship. Instead of focusing on the passage of time, I recommend mothers learn to recognize three separate factors, which, when combined, serve to gauge the status of their breastfeeding relationship. Once your mature milk has arrived, learn to recognize your baby's feeding signals, diaper output, and feeding clusters as indicators that breastfeeding is progressing in a positive direction.

### *Recognize feeding signals*

Rather than obsessing over the passage of time, become aware of what your baby is telling you during a feeding. By becoming alert, you can easily recognize the signs of a productive feeding. Learn to look at your baby, listen to your baby, and feel what is happening during the feeding.

*What to look for:* As you'll see in the next chapter, a feeding can be productive only when your baby is well attached to your breast. To begin a feeding, your baby needs to be very close to you. Once attached, look at your baby's face. His or her nose and chin should be touching your breast. The broad shape of your baby's nose enables your newborn to breathe while being very close to you.

*What to listen for:* Now that your baby is attached, listen for rhythmic breathing. When your baby is in an active feeding pattern, you will hear the continuous rhythm of your baby's nasal breathing. Next, listen for swallows. Between breaths, your baby will ingest your milk. Your baby may gulp in quick succession when your milk is flowing fast or may briefly detach from your breast. The sounds of rhythmic breathing and swallowing are what I refer to as your baby's positive feeding signals.

*What you feel:* Notice what you feel during the time that you and your baby are breastfeeding. As you position your baby for a feeding, you will

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likely feel a grabbing sensation as your baby attaches to you. In the initial days after birth, the attachment may be somewhat painful. Some transient soreness can be normal. Once your baby has settled into a phase of productive feeding, you will feel a continuous tugging sensation. It is normal for your baby to pause and take short breaks between bursts of sucking and swallowing. As you feed your baby on one side, notice if you leak milk from the opposite breast. Leaking is a signal that your breastfeeding hormones have become activated. During this phase of milk letdown, your baby will need to swallow very quickly in an effort to keep up with the fast flow of your milk.

### *Record wet and dirty diapers*

Although each baby is unique, healthy babies have some qualities in common. Learning how to assess your baby's overall well-being can reassure you that breastfeeding is going smoothly. Your baby's diaper count can help you in assessing overall health. If your baby is breastfeeding productively, then he or she should have multiple wet and dirty diapers daily. Wet diapers indicate that your baby is well hydrated. In the early days after birth, it may be difficult to tell if a diaper is wet, and it is normal to find pink crystal-like stains in your newborn's diaper. Following the arrival of your mature milk, your baby's diapers should be undeniably wet. Several of these diapers should feel heavy with urine.

In the early weeks of life, your breast milk has a laxative effect on your baby's intestines.<sup>3</sup> At least one diaper each day should be full of yellow stool and a mess to clean up! Your baby's stool might be liquid in consistency and require several baby wipes for clean-up. In addition to this large stool, your baby will have smaller bowel movements each day. Frequent stooling indicates that your baby is getting a good quantity of your breast milk. During the early weeks of life, these wet and dirty diapers tell you that your baby is productively feeding. As your baby matures, it is normal for your baby to pass stools less frequently.

### *Recognize feeding clusters*

Besides exhibiting positive feeding signals while breastfeeding and requiring lots of diapers, a healthy baby will be eager to breastfeed. Your baby should awaken from sleep full of energy and ready to breastfeed. In addition to feedings that have a defined beginning and ending, breastfed babies will cluster feed. During a cluster or hyper-feed, your baby will actively return to the breast many times over the period of a few hours for closely linked feedings. Typically, this pattern occurs during the late afternoon or evening hours, a time of day that is challenging to mothers. Keep in mind that cluster feeding is really power feeding. By repeatedly returning to your breast, your baby is receiving small amounts of high-quality breast milk.<sup>4</sup> This feeding activity also serves to build your milk supply. Power feeding is a self-limiting phenomenon that your baby will eventually outgrow.

Sometimes mothers misinterpret their baby's desire to power feed as afternoon fussiness, or a mother may mistakenly believe that her breasts have run out of milk. If you are unsure about how to interpret your baby's signals, I recommend that you offer to breastfeed your baby. By offering to breastfeed you can never be wrong!



## SUMMARY OF BREASTFEEDING ABCs

Establishing a breastfeeding relationship takes patience and perseverance. Once your baby is back to birth weight, you may notice that a natural feeding and sleeping pattern begins to emerge. Scheduled and timed feedings are based on formula-feeding rules and are not helpful when it comes to breastfeeding.

To judge the success of a feeding, become aware of your baby's feeding signals rather than the length of time that a particular feeding takes. If breastfeeding is going well, your baby will use numerous diapers. Additionally, most breastfed babies will have a distinct period of cluster or power feeding in the afternoon or evening. If you are ever unsure about

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how to interpret your baby's signals, you can never be wrong by offering a feeding.

### A. ADJUSTMENT

It is normal to feel overwhelmed after you arrive home from the hospital with your newborn. It takes time for you and your baby to become adjusted to each other. Initially, it may seem that your baby needs to breastfeed in random fashion with no discernable pattern. It is easy to become frustrated with breastfeeding during this chaotic time. After this period of adjustment, you will begin to recognize your baby's natural daily patterns of hunger and sleep. This pattern won't become recognizable if you attempt to impose an artificial schedule over your baby's innate rhythm of feeding and sleeping. Remember, this rhythm won't become evident until your mature milk has arrived and your baby is back to birth weight. To ensure that your baby reaches his or her birth weight by two weeks of age, encourage your baby to feed frequently in the days after birth.

### B. BECOME AWARE

Instead of watching the minutes tick by while breastfeeding, become aware of what's happening during the feeding. Observe your baby's position. Make sure your baby's nose and chin are touching your breast. Once your baby is attached, listen for the sound of your baby's rhythmic nasal breathing interspersed with swallows or gulps. These sounds are positive signals that your baby is productively breastfeeding. During a productive feeding, you should feel a tugging sensation. It is normal to feel your baby pause between active bursts of feeding. Sometimes, your baby may feed for a matter of minutes while other feedings may take longer.

### C. COMPATIBILITY

Build a breastfeeding relationship with your baby that is compatible with your lifestyle. Timed feedings and rigid schedules are not conducive to breastfeeding. As a mother, you can influence your baby's overall pattern

of feeding and sleeping. If it is convenient for you to breastfeed at a certain time each day, then consistently offer your baby a feeding at that time. Your baby will most likely become accustomed to this feeding. Take advantage of your body's natural rhythm and breastfeed when your breasts feel full of milk. It is normal for your baby to have a pattern of frequent or cluster feedings in the afternoon or evening. These feedings not only stimulate your milk supply but also provide your baby with small amounts of high-quality milk. By recognizing and responding to your baby's hunger and feeding signals as well as taking your own needs into account, you and your baby will develop a unique pattern of compatibility.