



PHOTO: AP

Suckers for succor

Can breast-feeding really be good for older children? Meet the mothers who keep going up to school age and beyond

BY EMMA COOK
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Few mothering habits, it seems, are guaranteed to provoke quite such a reaction as breast-feeding beyond babyhood. When I told anyone who happened to be interested that I was interviewing Ann Sinnott, a mother who had breast-fed her daughter for over six years and has now written a book on the subject, reactions ranged from discreet grimaces to outright revulsion. If I'd said I was about to meet someone who believed swearing at children was to be encouraged along with smacking them daily, the disapproval could not have been greater.

"It's obviously about her own needs, not her child's," a few mothers said, while one or two men, more predictably, homed in on the sexual potential. "She probably gets turned on by it." My seven-year-old son (keen breast-feeder for seven months) wasn't exactly neutral. "Yuck. Imagine me coming home from school and saying, 'OK, Mum, can I suck from your bosoms now?' It's weird."

If we find it weird, argues Sinnott, it's simply because we're not used to it. When was the last time you noticed a mother breast-feeding her eight-year-old in the local park? In public, at least, it isn't done. "But children aren't cultural creatures like us," says Sinnott. "Their biological imperatives are intact." Such an imperative is to feed as often — and as long — as possible, whether that be to two years old, eight or well beyond. In other cultures it is completely natural to respond to such needs, Sinnott claims, with three and four-year-olds continuing to breast-feed in Greenland, five-year-olds in Hawaii and seven-year-olds among the Inuit.

We know from a wealth of research the health advantages of long-term breast-feeding. The WHO now recommends breast-feeding with "appropriate complementary foods" for up to two years or beyond. But what about that key word "beyond"? Physiologically, there is no research, as yet, to suggest that breast-feeding for longer than two years is significantly beneficial. As the WHO says: "We don't know. There is no evidence either way." Sinnott is, however, passionate about the

advantages, even though the evidence she cites is overwhelmingly anecdotal, and personal. "A child who has been breast-fed to their heart's content... has a basic sunny aspect to their nature," she says. "They are amazing, self-confident and outgoing but not in a brash way — the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming."

At one point she mentions a 16-year-old boy who was regularly fed by his mother and cites examples of even older children. She says breast-feeding adolescents isn't a practice she would dismiss out of hand.

I wonder what sort of woman Sinnott can be before I am due to meet her on a snowy afternoon in Cambridge, England, at a hotel near where she lives. Her book is exhaustively researched and argued, if not a little evangelical at times, and can seem defensive when anyone — including two child psychotherapists — is skeptical about her views. Will she be, as my son would say, "weird," fanatical and humorless on the subject? Not at all. She is older than I expected, in her late 50s, with auburn, silvery hair and speaks softly with a faint Irish lilt. She works as a part-time administrator at Cambridge University, and is dressed in a black velvet top and a pearl necklace — the effect is more affectionate aunt than breast-feeding hardliner.

We sit in the glass foyer sipping hot chocolate, watching falling snow drift across the quad of Queen's College, while she chatters warmly about her only daughter, now nearly 18 and hoping to study history at Oxford university. "When Maeve was two, the thought of breast-feeding five or six-year-olds seemed horrific to me," she admits. "Then I spoke to an ex-colleague who told me he had been breast-fed until about eight and the scales just fell from my eyes."

When Maeve was six months old, Sinnott, then a health writer, knew she wanted to continue breast-feeding long term. "Her need to feed was evident, and I knew even then I would go well beyond a year. I realized I'd be treading outside the norm and decided to join a breast-feeding group who would support me."

Sinnott was a single parent by the time Maeve was born, devoting herself to her daughter's needs exclusively. "For the first three years, we lived a life when night and day were blurred. It was wonderful. She fed whenever she needed to. As she got older — around three — she was so strong physically. I remember visiting relatives and they would ask, 'How come she eats like a bird but she looks so robust, so strong physically?'" she recalls proudly.

Wasn't she eating solid meals by that age? "Well, it comes and goes at that stage if you're still feeding. I hear mothers and fathers anxious because their child doesn't feel hungry and I

think they're probably too full up on solids. Whereas breast milk is perfect — it changes to meet the needs of children whatever their age." Sinnott admits that her style of parenting isn't realistic for many mothers. "My circumstances allowed me to mother how I wanted."

The longer she breast-fed, the more women she met — of all ages and social classes — discreetly feeding older children well beyond primary school age. Although she is convinced that their numbers are on the increase, they are, she says, a hidden phenomenon, driven behind doors because they are so fearful of being misinterpreted and misunderstood. "I think the Internet has helped. Women have recourse to much more information and support. But many are still really afraid and worried about other people's reactions," she says.

Ruth (not her real name) would have felt distinctly uncomfortable breast-feeding her six-year-old son in public. "I wouldn't want to shock people, and just because I understand the health and emotional benefits, it doesn't mean everyone else will feel the same way." Ruth recalls how one of her male friends asked her if she "got off on it." "He didn't understand and didn't want to listen to my views anyway." Her partner found that as the father, other people tended to be less judgmental. "Any comments we got were almost always directed at Ruth," he says. "For some women I felt there was actually a degree of guilt as well as envy, which they didn't recognize."

Whatever the reason, there is something about breast-feeding older children that makes many of us feel awkward and, irrationally, uneasy. On some level it touches darker fears about a mother pursuing her own needs, potentially sexual as well as emotional, over and above that of her child.

Our general ambivalence on the issue is crystallized in that *Little Britain* TV comedy sketch where an extremely adult David Walliams cries "Not bitty later, bitty now," before latching on to a middle-aged mother to the horror of polite onlookers. This makes me wonder if Sinnott feels there is a limit to the historical example she found should be breast-fed? If, for instance, Maeve came home from college and still fancied the occasional feed, why not? Maeve, as it happened, decided she was no longer interested at around six-and-a-half but had she wished to continue, Sinnott says she would have, happily.

"I wouldn't pre-judge," she says and cites an historical example she found during her research, of a daughter in her early 20s, "suckled" by her mother for "comfort" during a bereavement.

Doesn't she worry that older children could be confused by the physical intimacy of breast-feeding? "No, no," she insists. "I know it's not a

sexual act. Anyway I don't see it as 'intimate.' If I hugged you, there's an intimacy there too." Not quite the same level of intimacy as a mouth latching on to your nipple, I suggest, but she won't acknowledge a difference.

Sinnott does admit that she was rather surprised that around 18 of the 181 women she approached in her research did "have an experience they could equate to sexual feelings." Maybe, she reflects, it is part of a "reward system," in other words, nature's way of "ensuring women will breast-feed because it's a source of physical pleasure to them."

Sinnott herself never enjoyed breast-feeding in that way. "Once she was latched on, I had no sensation," she recalls. Did she miss the experience when Maeve decided to stop? "No, but it was great. We were both ready at the same time, although she has no memories of it, which is a shame."

Stephanie Heard, a health visitor, breast-fed her son Wilfred for 16 months but her twin daughters continued to feed until they were six, stopping two months ago. "They are very proud and really enjoyed it," says Heard. "It was never a taboo subject, and when they decided to stop it was a mutual decision between the two of them."

When they were younger, they would feed at the same time but even at six, it was something of a shared experience. "Kizzy said 'I'm not going to have dee-dee — that's what they called breast-feeding — any more.' So Jenna said, 'If you're not having it any more, can I have your side?'"

"Soon afterwards they said, 'We're not having dee-dee any more,' and that was that. It was just another thing really, like sucking their thumb or needing a particular toy."

Stella Onions, 45, stopped breast-feeding her daughter, now nearly seven, last March. Her daughter still remembers it well. "It was delicious and yummy," she enthuses over the phone. "It made me feel happy."

Onions decided to carry on breast-feeding because she was convinced of the continuing nutritional value of breast milk to older children. "The more you read about it, the more you think what it does for the immune system is incredible." She also found it an effective way to offer comfort. "It does help when they're toddlers and they're upset, angry or tired."

Yet emotionally the advantages of extended breast-feeding are difficult to measure. One could argue that a mother's role is to steer her child towards independence, and that breast-feeding until well beyond primary school age could hinder the delicate process of emotional maturation and separation. Modern parenting theory would suggest that it is the parent, rather than the child, who should set boundaries, and by the age of eight, the mother

should be able to rely on less physical means of gratifying and meeting the needs of her child.

"It isn't necessarily productive," says Louise Emanuel, a consultant child psychotherapist and head of the under-five service at the Tavistock Clinic in London. "They may feel that to say no is cruel and heartless. I think parents who breast-feed for a very short time or a very long time may be displaying a manifestation of something similar." In other words, a difficulty to feel confident in what they have to give to a child. "Parents need to help their children cope beyond the physical presence of the parents, to internalize a helpful parent in their mind, even when the parent is not physically there."

Long-term breast-feeders believe the opposite. Helen (not her real name), now 50 and a lecturer who breast-fed her son until he was eight, feels that not rushing the separation process is what gives a child a stronger sense of independence later on. "The general fear is that the mother is overly dependent on the child, keeping them young or immature. I've spoken to enough people to know that isn't the case. More people are damaged by premature separation than by allowing someone to move on in their own time."

Helen's son stopped of his own accord, even though he used to say he would like to carry on for ever. "I do remember asking him, 'When do you think you'll stop?' to which he replied, 'When I'm married,' and once he said, 'When you're dead I'll stop feeding.'"

But where does this leave the father when the physical bond between mother and child is so close for so long? Helen says her partner never felt excluded. "He was fine about it when I explained what I was doing and why." Stella's partner is also supportive. "It's a natural, really, and makes perfect sense for the baby. I don't feel left out — I think my wife can be sexy and a mother."

Other men, says Sinnott, can be less tolerant when their partners continue to feed for years. "It's a common scenario in the US when a relationship flounders — breast-feeding is used as a means for a father to gain custody."

One has sympathy for many of Sinnott's arguments when they relate to her own personal experience but less so when she makes a more general case. "Look at what we've done to the world, the catastrophes around us... to say breast-feeding is the answer to our social ills is, of course, too simplistic, but I feel fairly sure that, in time, it will come to be acknowledged as a major component."

I'm more swayed by one mother who stopped breast-feeding her 14-month-old for the simple reason that "once they're old enough to walk across a room and ask for it, I think it's probably time to stop."