

What to Tell the Grandparents

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At La Leche League meetings, mothers often talk about the challenges of responding to comments or advice from grandparents.

"My mom doesn't understand why my baby seems to be always breastfeeding," one mother will say. "She bottlefed me and says I did just fine on a four-hour schedule."

"My mother-in-law says my daughter should be sleeping through the night by now," comments another. "She says if I'd start the baby on solid foods she'd sleep longer. But she's only two months old!"

Why is it often so hard to find the support and encouragement you hope for from your baby's grandparents?

Don't blame them. They raised their babies at a time when breastfeeding was much less common, and when the advice they were given was designed to fit babies fed formula, not mother's milk.

But you may be able to take some steps to bridge the gap:

Listen for the message behind the not-so-helpful advice. The mother-in-law who suggests cereal for a two-month-old doesn't know about the new research showing the risks of too-early solids. She's concerned about you and how tired you must be getting up in the night and trying to help you get more rest. If you keep that in mind, it's easier to thank her for her concern for you and then perhaps share some of the information you have about the value of waiting until the middle of the first year to start solids.

Make it clear that you appreciate their parenting choices too. Your enthusiasm for breastfeeding might seem like a criticism to the mother who opted to formula-feed you. But you can let her know that it was the way she raised you that encouraged you to look at the research, seek out a good midwife or doctor, and make choices that work for you and for the baby. While you might not do everything quite the way she did, you can let her know you value what she did for you.

Share information that may be new to them. For example, the grandparents may not realize that breasts don't work like bottles. Waiting for them to "fill up" before you feed the baby will just lead to a lowered milk supply, because breasts make milk more quickly when they are empty. It's frequent feeding that leads to an abundance of milk.

They probably also don't know that night feedings produce higher levels of prolactin than daytime feedings. This is important again for maintaining milk production, and also for suppressing ovulation, so that your fertility doesn't return too quickly.

A generation ago most parents were told there was very little difference between formula and human milk, so the grandparents may not know about the stacks of studies that show short-term and long-term health risks for babies who are not breastfed. They'll likely be surprised to hear that formula feeding is linked to lower intelligence – an average of eight points lower on IQ tests according to several studies. Knowing a few of these facts may help them understand why continuing to breastfeed is important to you.

A lecture on the topic may not go over very well, but you can always offer them copies of articles you've read, or mention something interesting and cool that you heard at your La Leche League meeting last week.

Help them find a way to connect with the baby. Grandma and Grandpa may have envisioned themselves happily bottle-feeding their new grandchild and perhaps having overnight visits by the time he was a few months old. Now he seems to be always breastfeeding and only attached to you. They might need some help from you to find a way to build their own relationships with the baby. Maybe Grandma could show off her burping techniques once baby is fed, or Grandpa could put on the sling and take the little guy for a walk around the house. You could ask your mother to sing some of the lullabies she once sang to you, or help with bath time. There are many ways to connect without bottles.

With luck, you can enlist your baby's grandparents as committed supporters of breastfeeding. And we all need more of those!