



Deciding When to Wean

There are many different opinions about when and how a child should be weaned from the bottle or breast. Some pediatricians believe children should be weaned around 12 months. Other experts think breastfeeding may be good for children until much later. It is also true that many children are on bottles until they are three years old and even older. It is perhaps best to follow the child's lead and consider the needs in the family.

Many mothers who work outside the home like to keep the first morning nursing well into the second year. Your breasts can make this adjustment as you drop the other feedings. As soon as a child can drink well with a cup, she can be weaned without losing nutrition. Many toddlers start weaning themselves by not taking the breast or not looking for a bottle.

Two things are important to think about when deciding when and how to wean your child. First, what does the breast or bottle mean to your child and how do you use it? Do you use the breast or bottle to soothe her, to keep her quiet, or to help her go to sleep? You may have to think of new ways to respond to your child.

Second, are all the people who care for your child committed to weaning? You should all agree and believe it is the right thing to do. If not, it will be too easy to give in to your child if she protests and refuses a cup. If you have mixed feelings, it will be a struggle.

Tips for Successful Weaning

If you decide to wean, you may want to follow these helpful hints:

- **Choose the time carefully.** Try to begin weaning at a time when your child's life is not too stressful. If possible, try to do it when there are no other big changes happening.
- **Make it a gradual process.** Begin by stopping any breast/bottle feeding that your child is not as interested in. For example, many toddlers care least about the mid-day feeding. The bedtime breast/bottle may be the hardest to give up, so save that for last. Gradually cut down on one feeding at a time. Sometimes it can take several weeks to stop one feeding time.
- **Offer a cup first.** For snack, meals, or when your child asks for breast or bottle, offer a cup. Use breast or bottle as a last resort.

- **Try to set some gentle limits.** To cut out more bottles or breast-feedings, you may want to make a rule like only using cups away from home.
- **The last feeding may be the hardest.** Again, don't feel rushed. Your child may have to go cold turkey with the last feeding, but try to make it as easy as possible for everyone. Prepare your child by letting her know when and how it will happen. Let her have some control over the process: let her pack up bottles; let her throw them away; or get a special "big girl cup." When you have decided to stop, tell her "all gone" in a matter of fact way.
- **Ask for help if you need it.**

Adapted from Healthy Steps Interactive Multimedia Training and Resource Kit (2000).