



The Finish at the Breast Method of Supplementation

Excerpted from
“The Breastfeeding Mother's Guide to Making More Milk”

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Traditional wisdom says that bottles should be given only after offering the breast so that baby sucks actively to remove the most milk. However, a hungry baby may have less patience for a breast with low supply and may stop trying without taking all the milk that's there. It's as if they know the bottle is coming and are just "paying their dues" at breast. As a result, they take increasing amounts by bottle, and milk production slows down, requiring even more supplements. This downward spiral effect is the reason that supplementing by bottle has such a poor reputation.

Christina Smillie, MD, IBCLC, suggests an alternative way that she calls the "Finish at the Breast" method of bottle supplementation. In her practice, she observed that babies who quenched their initial hunger and thirst with a bottle first tended to have more patience feeding at the breast. She began suggesting that mothers give a limited amount of supplement before breastfeeding and discovered that babies would breastfeed longer even if the flow was slow, removing more milk and increasing milk production.

Another great aspect of the "Finish at the Breast" method is that baby learns to associate the euphoria of fullness with the breast rather than the bottle, while you get the satisfaction of a contented, "milk drunk" baby falling asleep at your breast. When it happens the other way around, it can be disheartening and undermine your confidence to the point that you end up breastfeeding less and less.

The key to this technique is giving about one-fourth to one-half ounce (seven to fifteen milliliters) less by bottle than the amount your baby usually needs or takes. If too much is given, baby will not be hungry enough to feed well or long enough at breast. If too little is given, he may not have the patience to nurse. When he looks relaxed or finishes the bottle, whichever comes first, switch to the breast. If he fusses and seems to want more supplement after breastfeeding, give it to him, but be sure to finish at the breast, even if for just a minute or two. It may take a few days of trial and error to determine the best amount.

Be flexible and watch baby's body language so you can respond to the normal fluctuations in your production. You may find, for example, that you can give fewer supplements (or none!) during the night and before the morning feedings, but in the late afternoon or early evening, you need to give more. This is fine when it follows the normal fluctuations in your milk supply. As your supply increases, you'll be able to decrease the amount offered up front, little by little. The degree to which this method can increase milk production depends on the reason it is low. If the cause is secondary, it is likely to respond better to this technique than if the cause is primary. But either way, this method can work well to encourage baby to breastfeed as much and as effectively as possible.