

Natural Breastfeeding Limited

This story covers: Adoptive breastfeeding

Lily's Story: Our breastfeeding journey

Today I count myself to be one of the most fortunate people in the world. I have a loving husband (we have been together for 21 years) and the most beautiful daughter. But it wasn't always that way.

For 7 long, suffering years Jason and I tried to create our family. After many failed attempting at IUI and IVF we decided for our emotional wellbeing and for the strength of our relationship we had to stop chasing the dream of having a child. I always thought it would be a momentous day when we finally decided to 'call it a day', but it wasn't. It was just another day, with some sense of relief I have to admit, as a weight came off my shoulders. You see, the problem of infertility lay squarely on my shoulders; for some reason I just could not get pregnant. I had endometriosis, but not so severe that it should have interfered with conception. We were often told we were still in the 'gold standard' category by the doctors at Fertility Associates. For sure, I did not have good egg reserves, but when Jason and I came together in that petri dish we fertilised our eggs 100%. When our embryos, our babies, were put back however, they never took.

So you can imagine our surprise when a work friend of mine, Carla, asked me if I had ever considered surrogacy. After much discussion, counselling and soul searching Jason and I decided to go ahead with trying for our child via surrogacy. The day we got a positive pregnancy test was a whirlwind. Our 9 months of pregnancy went so quickly too, and soon enough our wonderful friend Carla, and our beautiful daughter Lily would change our lives forever.

I decided quite early on that I would like to find out about induced lactation (adoptive breastfeeding) as soon as I discovered that it could be achieved. I was fortunate enough to be referred by our obstetrician to Cheryl Ganly-Lewis, our lactation consultant who would become one of the most important people in our lives; particularly in the first six months of Lily's life.

Cheryl was learning about induced lactation at the same time we were. She was amazing from the moment we first met her. Cheryl knew that for this to be achieved we would need to approach breastfeeding as a family; as a team. She researched induced lactation and kept a step ahead of us the whole way through; guiding us along the way to successful breastfeeding. She became more than our lactation consultant; she was a friend, a mentor and the kindest and most trustworthy shoulder to cry on! When the minefield of advice came from all directions, it was Cheryl's advice that we took, and trusted.

Preparing for Lily's birth

Cheryl had me take the contraceptive pill prior to Lily's birth. I had sworn never to take the pill again after years of infertility...and here I was going for it! The pill was there to replicate pregnancy in my body. I began taking it around October and at the same time started taking Domperidone. After three months of this I stopped the pill and continued with the Domperidone. In January I started expressing for the first time with a double breast pump. After a day of this I got my first drops of milk and was overwhelmed with delight! For a woman who had never been pregnant, to know that I had milk for my future baby was simply

the best thing in the world. My body had always betrayed me with infertility, and here it was producing milk which would help to nourish my child! I continued to increase the number of times I was expressing until I was doing this 8 times a day. That was hard, but I was focused on doing the best for my little girl when she came. I wanted to be able to give her something of me; I hadn't been able to conceive her, nor carry her, so I was determined as hell to breastfeed her. The 2am expressing before Lily was born was hard, the expressing at work in between teaching classes was hard, the expressing at 6am in the morning was hard; but all this was worth it knowing that I was going to give my baby the best start to life that I could give her.

At Lily's birth

Cheryl had prepared Jason, Carla and I for what was to come when Lily was born with regards to breastfeeding. We watched the video on the belly-crawl and latching for the first time. I have to admit to being somewhat sceptical that this would happen for Lily and I. I trusted Cheryl implicitly though and was willing to give this a go. I never dreamed that Lily would latch on the way she did, at first bobbing her head whilst laying on my tummy, and then thrusting herself onto my left breast. I am so pleased to this day that we have it on video; you just wouldn't believe it unless you had seen it. I never thought that this little baby who hadn't come from my body would so easily latch on and bond with me as her mother. When she suckled for the first time I was overwhelmed with love and joy. I am so pleased that Cheryl was with us to share in that moment.

After Lily's birth – now the hard stuff starts

Cheryl had prepared me so well for what to expect from breastfeeding. We had talked much about what successful breastfeeding meant; that it was about the quality (time breastfeeding) and less about the quantity (of milk). All the research up to this point had shown us that adoptive mums who breastfed would probably not achieve a full supply. I was prepared for this; I had a tin of formula in the pantry ready to go when we should need it.

I never opened it.

Despite knowing that a full supply would probably not be achieved, I was determined to give Lily only breast milk for as long as I could. Because I had been expressing for 6 weeks before Lily was born I had amassed quite a supply in the freezer. But that was not going to be enough, and Cheryl prepared me for the fact that I would have to continue to express when Lily was born.

For the first 6 days of Lily's life I breastfed her as any mother would. She was born 3030g (6 pounds; 11 ounces) yet her discharge weight was 2780g. She hadn't quite lost her 10%, but I was worried about this weight loss. I was assured this was normal, so we took Lily home and I continued to breastfeed her on demand. It wasn't long before I became even more worried. Lily had to be woken up for her three hourly feeds; she just seemed to want to sleep all the time. Even when on the breast she would fall asleep and I would have to try to wake her. We tried everything to do this including wet flannels on her forehead. She would still fall asleep. At times I thought her sucking was going well, and at other times it didn't seem like she was swallowing at all.

The crux came when the visiting midwife weighed Lily and she had lost another 20g. The midwife assured me that all was well and that Lily was doing fine. But something inside me

knew that things weren't fine and that I had to do something about getting some weight onto my little girl. I called Cheryl and she came straight away. It was the best decision I ever made. I don't know what might have happened if I'd held off. Lily was not suckling well, not latching well and not getting enough sustenance. Cheryl tried to finger feed Lily but her suckle was too weak. We managed to get some milk into her via a Medela top up cup. I felt completely vulnerable and a sense of failure. I felt I had compromised my little girl's health because I had wanted to breastfeed her. I was sleep deprived and very anxious, and it took some time for me to accept that I would need to give Lily top ups of my expressed milk.

We managed with the top up cup after Lily had been on my breasts for each feed. I was only allowed to keep her on the breast for as long as she was actively sucking. I kept a chart of all feeds, supplements and poos and wees. On top of this, after each time I fed her I was expressing for 10 minutes. That included the last feed at night (around 12pm) and then the middle of the night (approximately 3-4am). I was totally exhausted, but after Lily's next weigh showed that she had gained some weight I was feeling happier about the direction we were taking. I knew that she would require top ups from here on and I was happy to do this if it meant that I could still breastfeed her. But like all things we were sometimes one step forward and two steps back. At one stage Lily had put on 130g in a week, but I was told by Plunket that the minimum had to be 140g. Again, I was upset and determined that the next weigh in would be a greater increase. Following that, over three days Lily put on 220g!

Eventually Cheryl suggested we move onto using the Medela supplementer that would attach to my breast and thus encourage an even greater milk supply. I was willing to do everything and anything to keep Lily at my breast. I remember this being one of the hardest things to get used to. The tears flowed as I tried to get the hang of the supplementer. It was so hard in those first 8 weeks to get the latching on to the breast right, let alone trying to manipulate a tube into Lily's mouth at the same time! I distinctly remember saying to Jason that I couldn't do it anymore and I'd just have to put Lily on the bottle. We worked through it though, and with his help, I was able to get the hang of it. I was so lucky to have his support; after all we knew going into this that it takes a team approach to successful breastfeeding. When he could, he would wash up the supplementer and refill it ready for the next feed. He would stay awake for the 12pm feed and wash up my expressing equipment while I went off to bed. I was so lucky.

The first time I went 'public' with the supplementer was at a 'Baby and You' course. I felt empowered telling the other mums my story and overcame my anxiety about people knowing that I was going through induced lactation. I wasn't embarrassed about it – just conscious that other people might think that I was jeopardising my daughter's health with my insistence on breastfeeding her. That feeling was to come back many, many times during our breastfeeding journey. I think it wasn't until Lily was thriving on solid food that I let that feeling go.

I remember telling Cheryl at about week 7 or 8 that I would soon be running out of expressed breast milk in the freezer. I was expressing 6-8 times a day and feeling exhausted still. But I had built it into my day and it had just become part of our routine. I knew that I was giving my daughter the best start to life by doing the expressing, so I felt that the small sacrifice I had to make was worth it. I knew it wasn't going to last forever, and that also helped me get through it. It is funny then, that I never did run out of the freezer supply. I came so close to it many times, but managed to avoid it. Lily continued to put sound weight on – yet she was always small in comparison to other babies of the same age and that always worried me.

My anxiety heightened once again when Lily was 4 months old. She was weighed again and had only put on 220g in 4 weeks. I was devastated. She hadn't been well, but I just couldn't be rational about that and felt it was all my fault. Once again I battled the anxiety

surrounding breastfeeding. Once again I increased the number of times I was expressing and started to give her more and more from the supplementer. We went through a hard month though, because Lily had decided that she didn't want that tube in her mouth any more, she wouldn't accept a bottle of expressed milk, and wouldn't try to use a sipper cup. At times I felt like I was battling her during her feeds, and I just didn't want it to be that way. We managed to work through it though, and more weight started to come on again. For the next two months I was always just one 200ml pottle of expressed milk ahead of what Lily was taking in supplements.

I made it harder on myself during this time because I didn't want to give her formula. It was a silly, irrational expectation of myself, but one that I just couldn't shake. I have nothing against using formula, but for some reason I felt like I would let Lily down if I had to give her this, rather than my expressed breast milk. I put so much extra pressure on myself, and this came at a cost in terms of my worry about breastfeeding. What I am proud of, is that when Lily was awake I made sure that she didn't see any shred of anxiety in me; I never wanted it to affect her.

On the contrary, throughout all of this, my daughter remained such a happy, contented little girl. If I hadn't been in the cloud of anxiety and worry I might have noticed that she was sleeping from 6pm through to 6.30am from 11 weeks old. I might have noticed that she slept well during the day and was a happy little girl when awake. She was an incredibly active little girl who loved to kick her legs, stand on her feet and jump in her jolly jumper. I might have taken stock and realised that there was absolutely nothing wrong with her weight and that she just had her daddy's body shape; long and lean. I feel silly that I couldn't fully accept when Cheryl told me that there was nothing wrong with Lily. I knew deep down that Cheryl would never jeopardise Lily's health, but I was too wrapped up in what other people were saying about Lily being so small. I was constantly fielding comments about her being 'tiny' and 'so small' in comparison with other babies of her age. It has made me think carefully about what comments I make to other mums!

At 5 ½ months I began giving Lily small amounts of solids. We started off very small and worked our way up from there. She absolutely loved it! At 6 months I began to wean her off the supplementer and swapped this with a sipper cup. She gradually took to it. Now, at 7 months Lily is off the supplementer completely and is taking only small 60-100ml top ups of expressed milk a day via the sipper cup. Her weight gains have been excellent and she continues to thrive. I now feel we have turned the corner and can relax more about feeding. Lily and I continue to enjoy the closeness that breastfeeding provides. I am so proud when out and about to breastfeed Lily; what a special thing to be able to share with her.

Would I do this all over again? Absolutely!

Breastfeeding Lily has been vital to our relationship and our bonding. I'm not Lily's biological mother, but I'm her mother in all other ways. Those special breastfeeding moments have solidified our bond and our love. When she looks up at me and smiles whilst feeding she melts my heart. When she plays with my hair while feeding I can't help but smile. When she strokes me gently while feeding I fall in love with her all over again. The efforts it has taken to breastfeed my baby have all been worth it. We have a closeness that I believe we wouldn't have if I hadn't breastfed. On top of this, I have this wonderful feeling of pride because I have nourished her and watched her grow as a result of my milk. I can smile and feel proud that my body, after all the difficulties of infertility, has responded well and nourished my little girl. It has solidified the love I have for my husband, who I couldn't have done this without. I also could not have done this without the love, support and knowledge of my lactation consultant Cheryl. Her role in our breastfeeding journey has been invaluable and I'll never be able to thank her enough.

I have been given the most precious of gifts in my life, and I'm so pleased that I've been able to give my little girl a very precious gift indeed.

