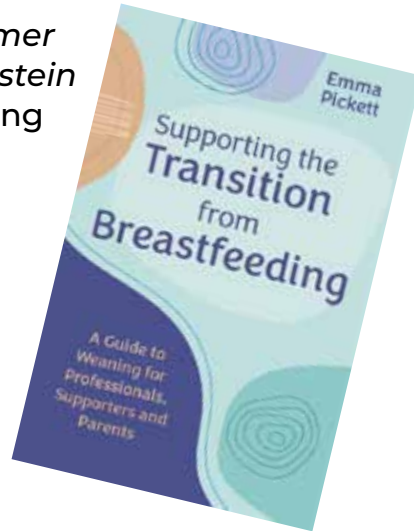


# Q&A with Emma Pickett IBCLC on the transition from breastfeeding

*Emma Pickett IBCLC, author, and former chair of the ABM, speaks to B.J. Woodstein IBCLC about her latest book, Supporting the transition from breastfeeding.*

**BJW:** Emma, what made you want to write this book?

**EP:** One of the things I was noticing was that the conversation about weaning wasn't really happening in the breastfeeding space on social media, and where it was happening, it wasn't really comfortable. So people who were being breastfeeding advocates, and particularly those advocating breastfeeding beyond natural term, seemed to not be quite sure how to have the conversation without also at the same time undermining breastfeeding beyond natural term...We were so big on normalising that, that we'd almost started to idolise child-led weaning...without really understanding the implications of that for parents...They feel isolated. They feel like they're almost sort of betraying the cause of lactation. They don't necessarily know where to get help. And when they do try and find help, they're told things that I think are really incompatible with a healthy breastfeeding relationship. So, they're being told to leave



▲ Emma's new book is available now and is reviewed in this issue.  
CREDIT: EMMA PICKETT.

their children alone, they're being told to leave their children with partners or family members, being told to go away, they're being told to put substances on nipples.

*At this point, it's worth mentioning that when Emma realised how lacking the conversation about this was, she wrote an article that got a lot of notice (see "Weaning toddler Bob and pre-schooler Billie: how do you stop breastfeeding an older child?" <https://www.emmapickettbreastfeedingsupport.com/blog/weaning-toddler-bob-and-pre-schooler-billie-how-do-you-stop-breastfeeding-an-older-child>). She soon became known in the UK for supporting the transition from breastfeeding. She noted in her work as an IBCLC that parents who had previously "been practicing loving, connected breastfeeding" were ending breastfeeding in ways that didn't "honour the connection you have with your child." Feeding parents didn't understand how to set boundaries and*

▼ Emma Pickett became an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant in 2011. She offers voluntary support at groups across West Haringey and volunteers on the National Breastfeeding Helpline and ABM national helpline alongside private lactation consultant work.  
CREDIT: EMMA PICKETT.



*instead were ending breastfeeding abruptly or in ways that damaged their bond with their child.*

▼ There is a perception that good mothers are the selfless ones. CREDIT: CRIATIVA PIX FOTOGRAFIA (PEXELS).

**BJW:** How does the image of a perfect, selfless mother affect weaning?

**EP:** We definitely feel that good mothers are the selfless mothers for sure...that's something we've never got away from...there is a little bit of a pocket of the breastfeeding/lactation community that thinks that...I think responsive breastfeeding is now the norm for infants and that's absolutely how it should be... But we haven't really supported parents to move beyond that. And to understand what happens next and how it transforms into a mutual partnership.

*Here Emma spoke about how we need to consider the emotional needs for*

*both parents and children, whereas often we feel that a perfect mother puts her children first and to do anything else is selfish. She said that some breastfeeding parents didn't realise they could set boundaries and "they didn't know they were allowed to say, you know, boobies are a bit tired, so we can just have a short boobie and then we'll have a cuddle and read a book." Emma pointed out that if breastfeeding parents are authentic, honest and open, and show that everyone's feelings and needs matter, they send the important message to their child that "It's okay to look after yourself". She said, "If we pretend to be infallible, what messages are we sending to children at the times when they're feeling tired and sad and down?" In fact, "you can make breastfeeding work in a way that works for everybody and that sometimes means that breastfeeding lasts longer."*

**“Responsive breastfeeding is now the norm for infants and that's absolutely how it should be... But we haven't really supported parents to move beyond that.”**

**BJW:** Why do you think it is important to end a breastfeeding relationship well and on a positive note? What might happen to the child and/or parent and/or their relationship if not?

**EP:** The first thing is that it colours their memories of the entire breastfeeding





**“ If you end breastfeeding abruptly, you haven’t had time to upskill yourself. Not only has the child not had time to adapt... but you haven’t had time as a parent to learn what else you can offer. ”**

experience...It does really seem to cause a break in the relationship with the child...

*Emma offered an example of a woman who didn’t know how to parent without breastfeeding and who was excluded from the bedtime routine because she’d had her husband take over that time*

*with the child. “And the child was rejecting her and...she was devastated. And she literally didn’t know how to get back in the room.” Besides feeling rejected, Emma spoke about children who are “very angry and very traumatised...it can be a really difficult time in a child’s life.” For the feeding parent, they might feel guilt or sadness or a whole array of other challenging emotions.*

**EP:** I suggest they do it more carefully, to upskill themselves before the breastfeeding goes. If you end breastfeeding abruptly, you haven’t had time to upskill yourself. Not only has the child not had time to adapt and change in terms of how their needs are met but you haven’t had time as a parent to learn what else you can offer.

**BJW:** Is there a change more generally that you’d like to see happen in terms of breastfeeding support?

*Emma spoke about the importance of being humble and centring and listening to parents. She said we have to be “really careful as breastfeeding supporters.” We shouldn’t be “gatekeeping the definitions of different kinds of weaning. So, I’m seeing people say, you know, child-lead weaning has to mean a certain thing.” When asked how breastfeeding supporters can show clients that we’re happy to work with them on weaning from the breast and not just with problems early on, she said:*

**EP:** I’ve noticed, on Instagram...just that little phrase that says we’re here for you at the end

▼ **The transition away from breastfeeding can be as difficult for the parent as the child, because they have to learn how to parent without breastfeeding.**  
CREDIT: HELENA LOPES (PEXELS).



as well...We're here at the beginning of your journey and at the end of your journey... Come back in the future if you need any help and that includes ending your journey as well.

*Emma commented that there are authorities that only provide funding for support with babies, or up to one year, and that some groups even say older children can't attend, so she suggested speaking to funders about this and also maybe offering sessions*

*once a month aimed at breastfeeding older children. She recommended that we work to connect people, have social groups for a range of child ages, and maybe have weaning-focused Zooms, where the parents can meet and support each other. She also reminded me that we also need to be able to support those who want to wean before a year and those who need to wean for medical reasons, and to ensure we know that babies over about five months don't have to have bottles and can have cups, since many parents worry about bottle-refusal.*

### Further information

- To listen to Emma's podcast, visit: <https://www.emmapickettbreastfeeding.com/makesmilkpod/>.
- Emma's latest book, Supporting the transition from breastfeeding is reviewed on page 38 of this issue.



### BJW: How have things changed during your 19 years in breastfeeding support?

**EP:** In some ways it's been sad to see how little change has happened in breastfeeding support in the UK. You know, I'm not going to lie, the NHS is in a really dire situation and NHS-based support hasn't really improved and certainly medical training and health professional training is not a lot better than it was...UNICEF baby friendly offers a lot, but it only goes so far...My overall feeling is one of slight despondency and that things aren't kind of improving and changing...But then there's social media. Although there is some negative stuff and inaccurate information on social media in the world of new parenting and lactation, it's offered so much...Overall, it's really connected people. My gut feeling is that there are more people breastfeeding beyond infancy as a result of that.

### BJW: What's next for you, Emma?

**EP:** No book in the works yet...I'm currently focusing on my podcast, which launched back in September...and I'm carrying on with my one-to-one practice and I'm a trustee for the Human Milk Foundation.

**BJW:** Thank you so much, Emma. Good luck with the new book! 

### About the author

BJ Woodstein is a lactation consultant, doula, Swedish-to-English translator, writer, and associate professor in literature and translation.

