AIMS For a better birth...

I breastfed my adopted baby!

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Adoptive parent Sarah Lee describes her wonderful breastfeeding experience

"You can breastfeed an adopted baby you know!" This statement was made in the kitchen of a good friend of ours a few months before we adopted our Ethiopian daughter. This news came as some surprise to my husband and I. Our friend brought out a book called "Raising Adopted Children" by Lois Ruskai Melina and read how adoptive mothers, having never been pregnant, could stimulate their own milk production. This could be done without the use of hormones simply by the sucking action on the breast of their adopted baby. I was thrilled at the prospect of breastfeeding my own adopted child. Indeed the topic had been raised by my statement that the only thing I would regret about adopting was the fact that I wouldn't be able to breastfeed our child. I had always intended to breastfeed any child I might give birth to, mainly out of a strong conviction that it had to be the best option for the child, but also as a positive encouragement to young mothers in the community. Currently living in Ethiopia we have discovered a 'west is best' mentality amongst many people. They have understood that formula milk is superior to mother's milk, despite the cost, and will soon have their baby on the bottle. There are a host of factors working against breastfeeding in Ethiopia, too numerous to mention here, but I felt so keen to help the friends we knew to breastfeed, and what better way than to breastfeed our own little Ethiopian baby.

So, how to start? It seemed clear that the best way to go would be to star t breast pumping a few weeks before baby came along. We would also need a supplementary feeding system for the actually feeding process. With only a few days to go before returning to Ethiopia we had to move fast on finding the equipment. We phoned the Medela help line. We ordered a Medela supplementary nursing system (SNS) and breast pump over the phone and they arrived in time for our depar ture.

We headed for Ethiopia. I started pumping my breasts 5 times daily, probably not as often as I should have and definitely not at night, against the recommendations. In the end I pumped for about 6 weeks. There was a slight increase in breast size and the size of the areola. After about 3 weeks there were tiny droplets of liquid on one breast during pumping.

At the same time we searched the web for sources of information. We found lots of web sites under the search 'breastfeeding adopted baby'. It seemed that most of the women (mainly American) were using hormone treatment. I was beginning to wonder whether I should acquire some in readiness for the baby's arrival. In the end I did get a doctor friend to send some out for me, but never used them! This wasn't because I was producing copious amounts of milk, on the contrary. I acquired a repor t written by the World Health Organisation on Relactation. The report was clear that hormone treatment could be useful

in increasing waning milk supply in a lactating woman but research had proved inconclusive for relactation. In fact the report recommended not to use hormones for relactation or lactation either in a woman who had given birth to her own child or an adoptive mother who had never given bir th. The report emphasised that the most important factor for relactation or lactation was proper breastfeeding management and support. This gave me the confidence to steer clear of using hormones.

My experience of breast pumping was not entirely positive. It was a huge commitment to break off activity 5 times a day (and that really wasn't enough) for 20 minutes a session. I did a lot of reading however. But in fact what I found was that it exacerbated the tension of waiting for a baby in a very uncer tain process. We didn't know whether she would come in 2 days or 6 months, so in the end I put the pump away and got on with life. The baby came 6 weeks later.

There are a number of natural 'lactagogues' we discovered on the web; the most significant being Fenugreek. I star ted taking this by swallowing 2 teaspoons of seed down with water 3 times a day. I star ted this treatment two months before baby came and stopped when she was 3 months. I noticed a change almost immediately. I gained weight and my breasts swelled. I cer tainly star ted to feel more 'armed for the task ahead'!

The big day arrived when I held Georgeana for the first time. She was 9 days old. We were allowed to 'foster' her until the official decision was completed through the law cour ts. This permission enabled us to get her 'latched on' as quickly as possible. She had been separated from her bir th mother at probably 2 or 3 days and then fed by bottle until we took her. According to what I had read, I was expecting her to need a couple of days to take to the breast again, but as soon as she got wind of mine, there was no looking back. She refused the bottle and settled on the breast as though she had 'come home'. I do honestly believe that the breast helped her to feel at home in spite of ever ything. To Georgie, her mother had been her breast, as well as her smell and sound, the warm soft tangible sensation of being cared for. She at least had something warm and soft to nestle into, even though the smell and sound were new.

As for me, with no 'hands on' help to latch her on properly and a baby with 'nipple confusion' and thrush, I was cracked within 24 hours and spent the next 12 days with an emotional and physical fight to keep my resolve to go through with the breastfeeding. After 12 days the pain wore off and we settled down. We had read many comments from women in the US about how their experience had been much better with the Lactaid SNS system. We had this sent from the States and in fact I used the Lactaid instead of the Medela SNS as it is mainly much more discrete and comfor table with other advantages over the Medela. We noticed decrease in milk consumption from the system of about 20%. Georgie was gaining weight normally and so the decrease in demand from the SNS System (formula milk) was due entirely to my own milk production kicking in. We were very encouraged.

The first three months were very difficult. Georgie and I kept cross infecting ourselves with thrush and with a lack of medical facilities in Ethiopia, it was a job to get rid of it. We were also required to travel a great deal for the adoption process and being away from home made breastfeeding with an SNS a real ordeal. She would soon get a bad latch because I was without my cushions and feeding in restaurants,

government offices, taxis and corridors and I would end up sore again. The attention I attracted was extreme because of the novelty of the situation and Ethiopians do not have an English reserve, not surprisingly! However I resolved to stick to it for at least 6 months, hoping by that time that I would enjoy the experience enough to want to give Georgie as long as she wanted, perhaps up to a year.

Things became a lot easier after the travelling ended around 3 months. The other exciting development was that almost immediately her milk consumption from the bags reduced again by another 25%. We were so thrilled to think that I was able to give Georgie my own milk. At 4 months Georgie began to fidget at the breast and I spent the last 2 months trying to feed a baby with ants in her pants. I made it to 5 months and 25 days, when the feeding equipment (and bras) finally went into storage! Georgie is a very active, inquisitive girl and obviously couldn't bear to be missing anything while on the breast. She drank from a training cup very well after 2 weeks weaning and it seemed to suit her moving on to the next stage.

We plan to adopt again and I am determined to give the same opportunity to any future children that Georgie so obviously enjoyed. Given hindsight I probably won't pump or even take Fenugreek next time. I believe that my milk came in in response to my being relaxed and confident and Georgie having a good latch and having been sucking for several weeks, rather than any other factor. I feel immensely proud of myself for having achieved my (nearly) six month goal, and even more delighted for Georgie.