

# Motherpumper

I had my first two sons within a minute of each other. I'm not sure if that means I was a first-time mom for a minute, or if I was a first-time mom until my third son came along four years later. Either way, being a mom is hard when you've never done it before ... and when you have. It's hard when you have multiple babies or one at a time.

## The plan

A lot of the stress I experienced during the first couple of years with my twins was due to logistics—how to comfort two crying babies, how to fit two babies in a shopping cart with a single child seat, etc. But, perhaps naively, I didn't think breastfeeding both babies at once would be that stressful. Two babies, two breasts.

I had the best intentions. I registered for "My Breast Friend" (a cringe-worthy name for a nursing pillow designed for multiples) and only purchased a few bottles "just in case."

I didn't go into the hospital with an iron-clad birth plan—I know a lot of the factors that drive delivery are out of your control. I *did* go in with a vision of our breastfeeding journey: I wanted to exclusively breastfeed for the first several weeks. I didn't want to supplement with formula unless absolutely necessary—and certainly not anytime soon. I thought all of this was within my control. Shocker: it wasn't.

## The reality

I didn't freak out when I needed an unplanned C-section after hours of pushing, but I did freak out when the hospital staff strongly encouraged me to supplement both of my boys with formula when they were just a few hours old. Apparently, they weren't getting enough colostrum to keep their blood sugar within a safe range.

And that's how the vicious cycle started—I'd nurse them, pump to jumpstart my milk, and supplement with whatever I could pump as well as formula.

I met with a lactation consultant in the hospital and left with resolve to get them "back on the breast" exclusively. I nursed, pumped, and bottle fed (a new mother's hell, also known as triple feeding). I worked with a lactation consultant at our house and shuttled the boys back and forth to the pediatrician for weight checks.

As the weeks passed, the triple-feeding pattern persisted. The process was successful because my boys were slowly but surely gaining weight (thank goodness), and I was producing a healthy supply of milk. But it taught me that nursing was *not* enough. They could suck for 15 minutes or 50 minutes, but if I offered them a bottle afterwards, they'd suck it. So I kept offering it.

I tried to eliminate the middleman—the bottle—and feed them directly from the source several times during the first few months. I didn't want them to get excited when they saw a silicone nipple and a plastic bottle. Somewhat selfishly, I wanted them to get excited when they saw *me*.

But by the time they were 4 months old, I was comfortable (not happy, but comfortable) with our routine, so I resigned to having a breastfeeding relationship with the hospital-grade pump that lived in the nursery.

I pumped religiously until they turned one. This feat is simultaneously one of my proudest accomplishments and greatest regrets. Yes, the twins got the benefits of breast milk for an entire year. And I got the benefit of burning calories by making milk. But that's it.

Instead of spending that year skin-to-skin with my babies, I spent about 546 hours (6 times a day for 15 minutes for 52 weeks) hooked up to two hard plastic cones that formed a loveless suction on my boob while a motor whirled away, quite literally vacuuming milk out of my nipples. I probably spent another 546 hours bottle feeding. And probably another 60 hours washing pump parts and bottles.

Feeding my babies wasn't the joyful experience I anticipated. It wasn't all bad, but it wasn't what I envisioned. I had to force myself to cherish the sweet moments I experienced with my babies and their bottles: how they made content little sucking noises; how their pudgy little fingers wrapped around the bottle; and how their eyelids would peacefully drift closed when their bellies were full.

## Another shot

When I was pregnant with my third baby, there were two experiences I wanted to do over: labor and breastfeeding. I didn't want to have another C-section, and I desperately wanted to exclusively breastfeed.

My desire for a vaginal birth went out the window when my baby was breech and measuring really big. I had to make peace with having another C-section whether I liked it or not. I was upset that my birth plan went out the window, but I was determined to make breastfeeding work.

I had a big boy—he was over nine pounds. I thought a “good eater” in utero would surely translate into a “good eater” in the real world, but it didn't work out that way. He was too sleepy to suck for more than a few seconds, maybe a few minutes during a good feeding.

He didn't get the hang of latching on, and I spent a lot of our first moments together bent over him—a puddle of emotion and stress—trying to coax my nipple into his mouth and keep it there while he either fell asleep or arched his back and moved his head back and forth in frustration.

During my stay in the hospital, I already started dreading feeding time because it gave me so much anxiety. I was completely in love with him, and I bonded with him immediately, but I didn't want to miss out on the experience I perceived as the ultimate mother-baby connection: breastfeeding.

## Deja vu

By day two of my hospital stay, the baby had low blood sugar. Queue the pump on wheels. The sight of it sent me over the edge. I didn't want to go down the triple-feeding path again. I didn't want him to learn how to drink from a bottle. I felt like I had no control over the situation, so I cried. I cried in my hospital bed. I cried as I shuffled around the room in my mesh underwear. I cried when visitors came and asked how things were going.

A few memories stand out during those first few days in the hospital: The baby had his tongue “released” by the pediatrician on staff, who somewhat reluctantly indicated that he could *possibly* have a *slight* tongue tie. One especially gruff overnight nurse told me the baby was “starving” and I should give him a bottle already. My husband gave the baby his first bottle, and once he started sucking, I tried to pull a bait-and-switch for the real deal. A lactation consultant covered my nipples in sugar water.

But despite all of the support from the hospital staff, lactation consultants, my family, etc., it was all on me to determine if the baby had a “good” feeding and if he was getting enough. And in the first few days of life, these are life-or-death questions, and it’s easy to second guess your judgment.

By the time we were discharged, we were no closer to figuring it out. I was tired, the pain meds from surgery were long gone from my system, and whenever the baby cried or fussed, I wondered if he was hungry.

## Obsessed with the breast

I thought about nursing constantly—even during the few hours a day I *wasn’t* feeding him or pumping. Whether or not I was nursing him successfully became my daily barometer for how successful I was as a mother. When a feeding went well, I felt like I was on top of the world. I had everything I ever wanted! I was rocking it as a mother of three! I rode the high until the next feeding, when he would invariably “forget” how to latch on and suck. He’d cry. I’d sob. Then I’d eagerly hand him off to someone else to finish feeding him because I felt rejected.

Unfortunately, this pattern continued in spite of working with a lactation consultant and having the baby’s tongue and lip tie laser-corrected by a specialist. (Turns out, he did have a pretty severe tongue and lip tie that wasn’t completely released by the frenotomy he had in the hospital.)

And so it went. I nursed, cried, bottle fed, and pumped. Pretty much in that order. I made excuses for why I was upset so I wouldn’t alarm my twins. I exhausted my husband’s patience. And yet, the only person pressuring me to make it work was me.

I kept trying until I couldn’t anymore. Then I turned back to the one thing that consistently emptied me: my pump.

## Relationship status: complicated

Breastfeeding is celebrated in society, which is great. It just doesn’t feel so great when it isn’t working out for *you*.

I’m grateful my body can produce milk to feed my baby, but that doesn’t mean I love my pump. I respect it. It does its job, but our relationship is complicated.

Pumping doesn’t feel natural or beautiful, and it requires steadfast dedication. It stretches your poor nipples beyond recognition. A physical feeling of fullness and a sense of duty, not the whimper of a hungry baby, calls you to your pump throughout the day. A cold, hard machine, not a warm, squishy baby, empties you. And logistically, it has unique challenges. You have to keep track of when to feed the baby *and* when to pump (unless you’ve mastered doing both simultaneously, in which case, you’re a superhero).

You have to time each pump around your daily schedule. And since pumping involves a motor, cones, valves, bottles, tubes, and ice packs for storage, it isn't easy to do away from home. You can't unobtrusively do it in public and no nursing shawl on the market can disguise the telltale whirring of the motor.

## One pump at a time

As I write this, my third baby is five months old. He exclusively drinks breast milk and is exclusively bottle fed. I don't know how long I'm going to keep it up. I take it one pumping session at a time. I don't buy nursing pads or pump accessories in advance because I can't handle thinking about the long-term commitment. I imagine the end of a breastfeeding relationship is bittersweet. I know the end of a pumping relationship is worthy of celebration (and possibly a breast pump bon fire).

I don't know how to answer when someone asks if I'm breastfeeding. I am, but sadly, I'm not. I'm a pumping mother.

## #MomLife

For me, being a mom is alternately hard, wonderful, happy, sad, and everything in between. My life has a clear *before* and *after*—the *before* lives only in memories, which soften over time. The *after* is real and constantly in flux. It's hectic and mundane; frustrating and joyful.

I wrote this to get my feelings on paper in hopes that it will help me let go and move the hell on. (Is it working? Meh.)

I'm still sad that breastfeeding wasn't in the cards for me, and I'll probably always feel like I got cheated out of something that should have been within reach. But I'm okay. The guidelines for what makes me a "good mom" aren't prescriptive; they're personal. Breast is best. Fed is best. Who's to say? I'm a good mom because I give my children the best I have to offer—whether or not that involves my breasts is irrelevant.

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