

**THE WEANING PROCESS AND THE DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY MOTHERS AND THEIR BABIES/CHILDREN IN THIS PROCESS****SÜTTEN KESME SÜRECİ VE BU SÜREÇTE ANNELERİN VE BEBEKLERİNİN/ÇOCUKLARININ YAŞADIĞI GÜÇLÜKLER****Bahtisen KARTAL<sup>1</sup>, Mukaddes DEMİR ACAR<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>PhD, Tokat Gaziosmapasa University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Tokat, Turkey**Abstract**

**Background:** Breastfeeding is a feeding method that has a positive effect on the health and emotional intimacy of the mother, babies, or children. However, the methods used for weaning can be traumatic for mothers, babies, or children. In this study, it was aimed to determine the difficulties experienced by babies, children, and mothers during the weaning process.

**Method:** The study is cross-sectional and descriptive research. The sample of the study consisted of mothers' (n=236) babies or children hospitalized in the paediatric clinic of a hospital between April and September 2019.

**Results:** It was determined that the mean breastfeeding period of the mothers was 20.35±7.6 months and they weaned their babies suddenly (31.4%). The reasons for mothers to wean their babies/children were that mother's conception, the child reaches the age of weaning, the child only takes breast milk and does not gain weight. In addition, it was determined that mothers used various methods to make the taste, smell and appearance of the breast look bad for the baby/child. Moreover, 92.8% of the babies/children had difficulties during the weaning process, and the most common difficulties were crying, restlessness, greater dependence on the mother, and sleep problems, respectively. During this period, 94.9% of the mothers experienced difficulties and breast problems, feelings of guilt, sadness and crying were the most common problems.

**Conclusion:** It was determined that mothers used traditional methods during weaning and both babies/children and mothers had difficulties with this process.

**Key words:** Breast-feeding, weaning, babies/children, traditional methods.

**Özet**

**Giriş:** Emzirme, anne ve bebeğin sağlığı ve duygusal yakınlığı üzerinde olumlu etkisi olan bir beslenme yöntemidir. Ancak süttten kesmede kullanılan yöntemler anneler ve bebekler için travmatik olabilir. Bu çalışmada süttten kesme sürecinde bebeklerin/çocukların ve annelerin yaşadıkları güçlüklerin belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır.

**Yöntem:** Araştırma kesitsel ve tanımlayıcı bir araştırmadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini Nisan-Eylül 2019 tarihleri arasında bir hastanenin çocuk kliniğinde yatan bebek/çocukların anneleri (n=236) oluşturmuştur.

**Bulgular:** Annelerin ortalama emzirme sürelerinin 20,35±7,6 ay olduğu ve bebeklerini aniden süttten kestikleri (%31,4) belirlendi. Annelerin bebeklerini/çocuklarını süttten kesme nedenleri annenin gebe kalması, çocuğun süttten kesme yaşına gelmesi, çocuğun sadece anne sütü alması ve kilo almamasıydı. Ayrıca annelerin memenin tadını, kokusunu ve görüntüsünü bebeğe/çocuğuna kötü göstermek için çeşitli yöntemler kullandıkları belirlendi. Ayrıca bebeklerin/çocukların %92,8'inin süttten kesme sürecinde güçlük yaşadığı ve en sık karşılaşılan güçlüklerin sırasıyla ağlama, huzursuzluk, anneye daha fazla bağımlılık ve uyku sorunları olduğu belirlendi. Bu dönemde annelerin %94,9'u zorluk yaşamıştı ve meme sorunları, suçluluk duygusu, üzüntü ve ağlama en sık görülen sorunlardı.

**Sonuç:** Annelerin süttten kesme sırasında geleneksel yöntemleri kullandıkları ve hem bebeklerin/çocukların hem de annelerin bu süreçte zorlandıkları belirlendi.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Emzirme, süttten kesme, bebek/çocuk, geleneksel yöntemler

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## INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is a feeding method that has a positive effect on the health and emotional intimacy of the mothers and babies/children (1,2). Breast milk and breastfeeding have many benefits for both the babies/children and the mothers in terms of health, immunity, developmental, psychological, social, and economic aspects (3). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recommend that babies be fed with only breast milk for the first six months, with additional nutrients from the sixth month to continue breast milk until at least two years of age (4,5). However, some problems with the mothers and babies/children may cause weaning early. Most of these problems are that supplementary feeding is started early in the first six months with the thought that milk of mother is insufficient, the decrease in breast milk, the child stops sucking, work of mother, conception, nipple infection and fissures (6-9).

This period is valuable and special for the mothers and babies/children who get over these problems and enjoy the duration of breastfeeding by showing success. This special period, in which the relationship between mothers and babies/children is established and strengthened, must be terminated as it will not last a lifetime. Therefore, weaning is a natural and inevitable stage for mothers and babies/children (10). This natural, difficult, and inevitable process should be preferred around the age of two when both the mother and the child are ready. In this period, daytime feeding should be decreased gradually in the breastfeeding pattern and should never be terminated abruptly. It is recommended to reduce daytime breastfeeding because it is possible to distract the attention of the child from the breast of the mother during daytime by such as playing methods. During the weaning period, the mothers should not be separated from her babies/children. If breastfeeding is stopped abruptly, breast problems may occur due to the accumulation of milk in the mother, and depressive symptoms may occur due to the

rapid decrease in prolactin level (11). It is known that mother-infant attachment is important in a child's development process (12). In addition, touching, eye and skin contact during breastfeeding plays an important role in establishing a bond between the mothers and the babies/children and this interaction continues its effectiveness throughout life by deeply affecting physical, psychological, and intellectual development of the child. For the child to develop safe bonding, this bond between mother and child must not be under threat (13-15). In addition, in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, it is reported that oral pleasure is important at the age of 0-1 and breastfeeding provides this pleasure. Sudden completion of this pleasure in the period of breastfeeding may lead to errors in the child's emotional, social, and cognitive development in the future (16). The methods used to change the appearance and taste of the breast during the termination of breastfeeding can cause damage to the bond between mother and child and turn this period into a traumatic situation (11,17,18). Besides, the mother's breast is an important object for the bond between mother and child, so using methods such as disgust and separation can lead to unstable emotions in a child who is not yet ready to wean. This situation can cause anxiety disorders in children (19,20).

There are studies in the literature where traditional methods used for weaning are determined (8,17,18,21-23). In this study, we aimed to determine the traditional practices used in the weaning, the reaction of babies to the process and the difficulties experienced by mothers in this process. Investigation of methods used for weaning, difficulties and traumatic situations in this process will be a guide in terms of planning the education and counselling services that will be given to mothers and families and evaluating their negative effects on maternal and child health.

### Research questions:

1. What are the methods mothers use during the weaning process?

2. What are the difficulties that mothers experience during weaning?
3. What difficulties do babies/children experience during the weaning process?

## METHODS

### Type of research

The study is a cross-sectional and descriptive research. In this study, it is aimed to determine the difficulties experienced by babies/children and mothers during the weaning process.

### Study Sample

With the sample calculation of unknown universe, the minimum sample number required for 95% confidence interval, 5% error rate and 84% prevalence value was found 207. Study data were collected in the paediatric clinic of a hospital between April and September 2019. The sample of the study consisted of 236 mothers. Mothers who breastfed their baby/child for at least 6 months and completed the weaning process less than 6 months ago were included in the study. In addition, mothers who did not have communication problems and volunteered to participate in the study were included in the study.

### Data collection

In the data collection, we used a semi-structured form of 27 questions prepared by the researchers by reviewing the literature to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of mothers, the reasons, methods, and difficulties of weaning. The questions of this form created by the researchers were restructured by taking the opinion of 3 experts. This form was applied to 5 mothers out of the sample for pre-application. After the pre-application, the form was rearranged. The data of the study were collected by the researchers through face-to-face interviews. One interview lasted about 20 minutes.

### Data analysis

SPSS software was used for data evaluation. Descriptive statistics (number, percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used to evaluate the data of the study.

## Ethic approval

Ethics Committee approval was obtained for this study from the Clinical Research Ethics Committee (19-KAEK-072) and institutional permission from the hospital. In addition, the participants were informed about the study and verbal consent was obtained. The principles of confidentiality and anonymity were explained to each participant.

## RESULTS

The average age of mothers was  $31.27 \pm 5.58$ , the average number of children was  $2.19 \pm 0.91$ . It was determined that 56.4% of the mothers were high school graduates and 72.9% had a nuclear family. It was determined that the average breastfeeding period of mothers was  $20.35 \pm 7.6$  months, 69.5% of them considered the duration of breastfeeding adequate (Table 1).

In addition, 46.2% of the mothers stated that they stopped breastfeeding due to the increasing age of the child. Other reasons for weaning; Pregnancy (19.9%), not getting any food other than breast milk/not gaining weight (21.6%) and decrease/end of milk (10.6%) were stated by mothers. Mothers weaned their babies/children by reducing the number of breast feedings (41.1%) and suddenly (31.4%). It was determined that 19.4% of the mothers told their baby/ child that the breast is bad, that 14.8% only breastfeed at night, that 16.0% put something hairy on her breast. In addition, it was determined that 14.4% of the mothers applied a black and foul-smelling stone to their breasts, and 8.2% of them applied black tape to their breasts. Applying lemon/vinegar/salt, henna/tincture iodine/chocolate/molasses to her breast, sending her baby/child to a relative, telling her child that the breast hurts, were other weaning methods of mothers (Table 2).

92.8% of the mothers stated that their baby/child had difficulties during the termination of breastfeeding. The difficulties experienced by their baby/child during the weaning process were reported by their mothers as crying (61.1%), moodiness (35.6%), increased dependence on the mother (26.4%),

sleep disturbance (25.5%) weight loss (10%, 5), not eating (6.8%) and fever/illness (7.3%). 60.2% of the mothers stated that the

difficulties experienced by their baby/child during the weaning process lasted longer than 6 days.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic and breastfeeding characteristics of mothers

Socio-demographic characteristics	Mean± SD	
Age of mothers	31.27±5.58	
Number of children	2.19±0.91	
Mean of breastfeeding (month)	20.35±7.6	
	n	%
<b>Educational status of the mothers</b>		
Basic education	103	43.6
High school	133	56.4
<b>Occupation of the mothers</b>		
Yes	81	34.3
No	155	65.7
<b>Type of the family</b>		
Nuclear family	172	72.9
Extended family	60	25.4
Broken family	4	1.7
<b>Breastfeeding period</b>		
6 months	11	4.7
7-12 months	40	16.9
13-18 months	49	20.8
19-24 months	97	41.1
25 months and more	39	16.5
<b>Thinking that breastfeeding time is enough</b>		
Yes	164	69.5
No	56	23.7
Partly	16	6.8

Moreover, 94.9% of the mothers stated that they had problems during the weaning process. In this process, mothers had difficulties such as breast problems (38.8%), feeling guilty (38.3%), feeling sad/crying (26.7%), experiencing anxiety/stress (22.3%). In addition, mothers stated that they had difficulty in coping with their children's mood (20.5%) and that they had sleep problems (16.5%) (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations children's Fund (UNICEF) recommend that babies be fed only with breast milk for the first six months, with additional nutrients from the sixth month to continue breast milk until at least two years of age (4,5). In the study, the average breastfeeding period of the mothers was determined to be 20.35 ± 7.6 months. In the

study by Dinç et al. (8) the average duration of breastfeeding of the mothers was 12.61 ± 4.31 months, moreover, it was found by Gök Uğur et al. (23) that the mean of time for mothers to separate their babies from breast milk was 15.96 ± 9.34 months, and the average breastfeeding was determined as 16.7 months by Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (24) Furthermore, Güraslan Baş et al. (22), determined the average breastfeeding as 19.00 ± 7.11 months similar to the present study. In a study, it was determined that breastfeeding was too short, and children were malnourished due to poverty (9). The mean time for breastfeeding in the present study was close to time WHO and UNICEF recommended and was found higher than the other studies (4,5). It is thought that the breastfeeding average is high due to mothers who breastfed for at least 6 months were included in our study.

**Table 2.** Reasons for weaning by mothers and their methods of weaning

<b>The reasons of weaning *</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Increasing the age of the child	109	46.2
Conception	47	19.9
Not getting any other nutrients except breast milk/not gaining weight	51	21.6
Reducing/ending of the milk	25	10.6
Medication	13	5.5
Strain, weakness, getting tired of breastfeeding	19	6.7
Having problems with breast (nipple fissures, mastitis)	7	2.9
Starting work early / going out of the city	2	0.8
Having a health problem in the other child	2	0.8
<b>The state of abruptly/ reducing weaning</b>		
Reducing the number of daily breastfeeding	97	41.1
Breastfeeding only at night instead of daytime	35	14.8
Weaning abruptly	74	31.4
Child stopped to breastfeed / ending of the milk	30	12.7
<b>Weaning method* (n=206)</b>		
Telling your baby/child that the breast is bad	40	19.4
Putting something hairy on the breast that the child will be startled	33	16.0
Applying a kind of smelly black stone on the breast	30	14.5
Sticking a black band / band-aid	17	8.2
Sending the baby/child to a relative	12	5.8
Applying lemon/vinegar/salt on the breast	14	6.7
Applying henna/tincture of iodine/chocolate/molasses on the breast	5	2.4
Telling the baby/child that the breast hurts and burns	4	1.9
Speaking to convince	4	1.9

\* More than one answer has been given.

In this study, it was determined that 69.5% of the mothers found the breastfeeding period sufficient. In another study, it was stated that 36.7% of mothers stopped breastfeeding because they thought their child was breastfed enough (17). In our study, the fact that most of the mothers found breastfeeding time sufficient may be due to the high duration of breastfeeding.

One of the important findings of our study is that one-fifth of mothers stop breastfeeding because they became pregnant. In a study conducted at the United Arab Emirates, it was stated that 32.5% of women stopped breastfeeding due to a new pregnancy (25). The interruption of breastfeeding due to pregnancy may have resulted from problems with the use of family planning methods and cultural differences between countries. In our study, one-fifth of the mothers have terminated breastfeeding because of the conception, this is

important to show that they need education on effective postpartum family planning methods.

The method of weaning by decreasing breastfeeding step by step is considered as a non-traumatic method applied by giving a feeding bottle or trying to offer another food depending on the age, bypassing that breastfeeding meal when the child loses interest in any of the daily breastfeeding. Sudden weaning approach is a common wrong method to terminate breastfeeding of babies in most societies (8). In a study conducted in eastern Turkey, it was found that more than half of mothers use traditional methods that can cause trauma in children during the weaning process (22). In our study, approximately one third of the mothers stated that they used the method of abruptly weaning, 41.1% of them reducing the number of breastfeeding per day, and 5.8% of them using the method of sending their children to a relative during the weaning. In the study of

Alsaç and Polat, it was stated that 45.0% of the mothers terminated breastfeeding abruptly, and 32.9% by reducing it. (17). In other studies, researchers found that mother's distance themselves from their babies during the weaning process (8,18,23). These methods used

by mothers in the process of weaning are important in terms of having effect on the bond between the mother and the child and causing the child to experience emotional trauma in this process.

**Table 3.** The problems that mother experience with their baby/child and themselves during the weaning

<b>Babies/children's experience of difficulty in the weaning process</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	219	92.8
No	17	7.2
<b>Difficulties experienced by babies/children* (n=219)</b>		
Crying	134	61.1
Getting ill-tempered	78	35.6
Increased dependency on the mother	58	26.4
Sleep disturbance	56	25.5
Losing weight	23	10.5
No eating	15	6.8
Fever / illness	16	7.3
<b>Duration of babies/children's' difficulty experiences (n=219)</b>		
0-2 days	35	15.9
3-5 days	27	12.3
6 days and more	132	60.2
Not remember	25	11.4
<b>Mother's experience of difficulty in the weaning process</b>		
Yes	224	94.9
No	12	5.1
<b>Difficulties experienced by mothers* (n=224)</b>		
Breast problems	87	38.8
Feeling guilty	86	38.3
Feeling sad / crying	60	26.7
Experiencing anxiety / stress	50	22.3
Difficulty in coping with mood of the baby/child	46	20.5
Sleep problems	37	16.5
Difficulty in being stable	36	16.6
Having problems with their partner	8	3.5

\* More than one answer has been given.

The most common method used for weaning is to disgust the child by changing the taste or appearance of the mother's breast (applying tomato paste or hot pepper on the breast, putting a hairy object around the breast, etc.) (8). The methods used to change the appearance and taste of the breast during the weaning can cause damage to the bond between mother and child and turn this period into a traumatic situation. In our study, it was determined that the mothers used methods that changed the appearance and

taste of the breast during the weaning process. The results of other studies are like our study (8,17,18,21,23,26). Since the breast is an important attachment object for babies, showing the breast badly to babies may cause trauma in infants/children.

Weaning performed with ineffective and traumatic methods at a time when babies/children are not physically, mentally, and emotionally ready can cause the baby/child to

feel punished, harm their psychosocial development, and cause the mother to experience problems such as guilt, inadequacy and stress, breast pain and mastitis (25,27). In this study, it was determined that most of the mothers had problems during the weaning period. During the weaning period, approximately one-quarter of mothers experienced breast problems and guilt, and approximately one-quarter experienced crying/sadness. In the study of Gök Uğur et al., 63.8% of the mothers had difficulty in the process of weaning (23). Moreover, in our study, most of the mothers stated that their babies/children had problems in the weaning process. Among these babies/children, reactions as crying, getting ill-tempered, increased dependency on the mother, sleep disturbance, weight loss, fever / illness, no eating were seen. The results of other studies were like our study (17,23). These results show that weaning is a difficult process for both mothers and babies. The traumatic features of traditional methods used in the weaning process may increase the responses of babies. These results demonstrate the need to encourage mothers to use non-traumatic methods in the weaning process to protect the mental health of mothers and babies.

## CONCLUSION

About half of the mothers thought that their child had reached the age of weaning. Other reasons for weaning were getting pregnant, the child only getting breast milk and not gaining weight. One third of the mothers stated that they stopped breastfeeding abruptly. The mothers stated that it was bad to breastfeed their babies during the weaning process and that they used objects and practices to scare the baby.

In addition, it was determined that 92.8% of the babies had problems during the weaning process, and the most common problems were crying, restlessness, more dependency on the mother, and sleep problems, respectively. It was determined that 94.9% of the mothers had problems, and the most experienced problems were breast problems, feelings of guilt, sadness and crying.

When we reviewed the relevant literature, there was no guide that mothers could use in the process of weaning. Since the mothers do not have a guide to reach, they apply the methods they learn from the people around them. Creating a guide that mothers can benefit in the process of weaning can minimize the difficulties that mothers and babies experience in this process and the problems that may arise in the future lives of children. In addition, it is recommended to conduct a prospective or/and experimental study on mothers who are in the weaning process.

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No financial support has been received for this study.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors in this study.

## Note

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