

# Tips for professionals supporting an Autistic person with breastfeeding



## Respect choices around feeding

Supporting an Autistic person's feeding choices begins with understanding and respecting their decision-making process.

A consistent theme for Autistic parents in the perinatal period is that research is both overwhelming and critical to their process of making decisions. They will likely put a huge amount of pressure on themselves to breastfeed, because that is the majority messaging. They may make this decision even if breastfeeding causes them pain, overwhelm or distress. Following the rules may cause them to push themselves to breastfeed until the baby is two in line with the WHO recommendations. Therefore support Autistic individuals in information that provides a holistic view of family needs and capacities. For example, helping parents to consider that what is best for parent

infant mental health and attachment might actually be a calm formula-feeding parent, rather than an overwrought breastfeeding one.

Like all parents, many Autistic people may decide that breast/chestfeeding is not for them. It is important that support for all feeding is directly communicated.

For Autistic people, it is more than clinicians respecting choices; it is also about spotting where it might be detrimental to the birthing parent to persist with breastfeeding and actively give the choices of expressing or formula. Almost like permission! Normalise and validate difficulties with breastfeeding. Messaging around "fed is best" is critical particularly with Autistic people.

### **Nic describes the pushback from professionals around choosing not to breastfeed:**

"I had a lot of trouble with breastfeeding. But yeah, so I was very anxious and scared about him getting enough food, about me being able to perform adequately in the breastfeeding department. Because breastfeeding was really the only ... What's the word? Acceptable feeding method that was projected ... Yes, you can bottle feed, but the way it was communicated was that was second best, and it's a failure if you don't do the breastfeeding. So yeah, there was a lot of anxiety around that."

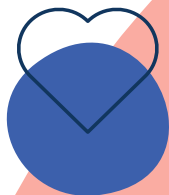
### **A note on language:**

We use the terms breastfeeding and chestfeeding to recognise and include all people who feed their babies this way. While the terms may be different, the process and benefits are the same. Using both helps ensure everyone feels respected and seen, including trans and non-binary parents.

## **Recognise sensory differences and overwhelm**

Sensory sensitivities can make breastfeeding difficult – for example, due to touch, smell, or noise – but many Autistic people still want to breastfeed and benefit from tailored support. Acknowledge and validate the person's experiences and affirm the use of headphones and sensory tools or technology to support the parent while feeding.

Breastfeeding can be a sensory intensive experience, which can contribute to sensory overwhelm, Autistic burnout, touch aversion, and dissociation. To support someone through this, see our [meltdown and shutdown tips](#)! Offer guidance or work together to help new parents or families replenish their spoons that may get used up during breastfeeding. This could be a quiet moment in a dark room after feeding or expressing once a week for a tactile break.



## **Avoid hands-on approaches**

Respect bodily autonomy. Instead of physically guiding someone's body, demonstrate with a doll or use visual tools like diagrams, videos, or step-by-step photo guides.

## **Offer clear, direct communication**

Use plain language. Avoid vague instructions like "just relax" or "you'll feel it when it's right." Instead, describe what to expect, what might happen, and what they can do.

## **Create a calm, sensory-considerate environment**

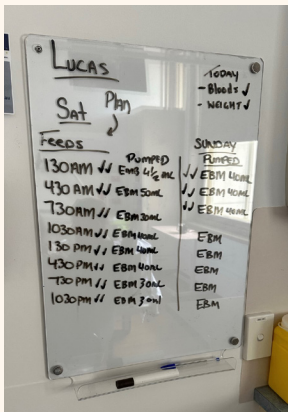
Bright lights, noise, and strong smells can be overwhelming – this is a common experience for many Autistic people, especially in unfamiliar or high-stress settings. Support the person to identify a space and set-up that feels safe and comfortable to them. To do this, you'll have to ask the person what makes an environment feel calming.

Consider ways to reduce sensory challenges, such as a nipple shield to minimise pain or contact or alternating between breast and bottle. Or make feeding a family affair! An Autistic breastfeeding parent may appreciate a spouse, partner, or trusted support person to help share the sensory load. Maybe they hold the baby during feeds to mitigate hypersensitivity, or offer support in other individualised ways.



**Kimmi describes one of the positives of receiving extra support from lactation consultants and nurses when she had time in the NICU.**

"Yeah obviously being in the hospital wasn't great but in terms of you know, getting to learn how to feed my baby, how to burp the baby, how to change the baby, how to wash the baby. Everything was done slowly because obviously he's prem. He sort of does everything slower and so do I. But the structure side of things was really great. My lactation consultant gave me a whiteboard marker to mark everything down. I had like a little timeframe going on the whiteboard. Okay, he's going to eat at this time. I was able to set my alarm to my phone to say I'll get the feed times right. You get to go feed, you know at the nurse's station to feed the baby and I was able to do my pumping sessions there as well. So it was very structured, and I loved it."



**Provide support creating a routine**

Routine helps, and providing clear structure can lead to more success for many parents.

Consider the probability that executive functioning may be a current challenge for a lot of your parents, especially due to fatigue, sensory overwhelm, and routine changes. Some parents may breastfeed, in part, due to a lack of capacity to make a plan for another method, or because baby refuses to be on a schedule and a bottle feeding routine is not possible.

**Offer written or visual resources to revisit later**

Processing spoken information in the moment can be difficult. Follow up with accessible, autism-friendly written information or resources, especially so that they can look at the information after an appointment.

**Understand that support may need to be more detailed or repetitive**

Providing repeated reassurance, reminders, or checking in on small details may be helpful and welcomed.

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## Reflecting on Chelsea's story

Chelsea's story highlights the importance of trusting and supporting Autistic people in their own decisions – particularly around what feels right for themselves and their baby. Her experience reminds us that person-centred support means listening without judgement and affirming Autistic people's own knowledge about their needs, preferences and boundaries.

She also raises a crucial point that many participants in our study echoed: the feeling of being "touched out." This sensory overwhelm can come from the constant physical contact of caring for a baby – something that's often intensified for Autistic parents. Recognising and validating this experience is key to providing support that is both compassionate and autism-informed.

### Chelsea's story:

Yeah, it actually came naturally to me. I was very keen to breastfeed all three. Well, my first one was more of a money saving thing, but also I wanted that bond with him too. So that was fine. I didn't have any issue ... Only thing with [my baby] was she would only breastfeed from one side. She refused to breastfeed from the other side. So I think removing that pressure and a lot of people, I don't know, again, I don't know if it's an Autistic thing or just people thing in general, but when I was feeding her in public, they'd be like, "Why are you never not feed her on the other side?" I'm like, "She doesn't want to." And they'd be like, "But children feed from both sides," and that, again, that's societal norm of what breastfeeding looked like, looked different to us. And she was fine. I breastfed for two years just from one boob. So she was fine. I'm completely misshaped and horrible by the end of the two years, but I breastfed from one side. But yeah, breastfeeding was for me, was easy. The only thing that I really struggled with, especially with my second, because he never slept either, so I felt like I was feeding constantly, was getting really touched out ... I was breastfeeding, it was pretty much just 24/7. I had this koala bear on me. So I think just the sensoriness of just being over touched and overwhelmed, I think, was really hard.

## Where to go for more information

1. Australian Breastfeeding Association, [Joey's story of breastfeeding with autism](#)
2. [Dr Aimee Grant discusses the differences Autistic people may experience when breastfeeding](#)
3. [Autistic women's views and experiences of infant feeding: A systematic review of qualitative evidence](#)
4. Australian Breastfeeding Association LiveChat: [breastfeeding.asn.au/livechat](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/livechat). Offering access to real-time and evidence-led answers around breastfeeding/chestfeeding. LiveChat may be a more accessible option than calling someone or attending another challenging medical appointment.



**Sometimes we all need  
a bit of extra support**

**Chat to us online**  
Daytime 12-2 pm AEST  
Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays  
Evenings 8-10 pm AEST  
Every weeknight

**LiveChat**  
Breastfeeding  
info with ABA

[breastfeeding.asn.au](https://breastfeeding.asn.au)



### Expertise behind this tip sheet

This tip sheet draws on research into the perinatal experiences of Autistic people and is guided by the insights and wisdom of Autistic individuals with lived experience.



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