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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Biopsychosocial repercussions of early weaning

Repercussões biopsicossociais do desmame precoce

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Abstract

Introduction: Breastfeeding brings biological, emotional and economic benefits and is therefore considered a crucial food for the adequate growth and development of the infant. However, the removal of this nutrient from the child sometimes occurred before the recommended period. **Objective:** In view of this, the present research aims to study the reasons and consequences of early weaning in children under six months of age. **Methods:** Basic, exploratory work was carried out with a qualitative approach, in order to aggregate and familiarize readers with the topic, which is based on a semi-structured questionnaire. **Results:** After analyzing the data, it was observed that the complaint of little milk, problems in the mothers and difficulty in gaining weight in the child were the main factors associated with ablation. While, asthmatic bronchitis, atopy and intestinal problems were the main complications. **Conclusion:** This study confirmed the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, with positive aspects for the child and the nursing mother.

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INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is a primary nutritional intervention for children and a crucial element from biological, social, and economic perspectives. It nourishes and develops the child's health, strengthens the bond between mother and child, and reduces spending on infant formula. In Brazil, the mother's right to breastfeed is enshrined in law. According to article 9 of the Statute of Children and Adolescents (Law No. 8,069, of July 13, 1990),[1] women must have satisfactory conditions to breastfeed their children in the workplace[1].

Breastfeeding is fundamentally important, especially in the first years of life, as it is crucial for developing and maintaining the child's health. However, despite the benefits and rights associated with breastfeeding, its duration is shorter than recommended. Research indicates that two out of three children under six months of age consume other foods[2] and 52.4% of mothers do not follow the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations[3].

Weaning has become more common in Brazilian society, influenced by numerous historical, cultural, biological, and emotional factors that may compromise children's proper nutrition, increase their predisposition to food allergies and diarrhea, and undermine their oral motor skills[4]. The rise in infant morbidity and mortality is a likely consequence of this trend. In this context, breastfeeding acquires renewed significance in disease prevention among children[5]. Public policies that provide recommendations and guidance on food and nutrition also play a fundamental role in promoting child health. More attention needs to be focused on the biopsychosocial dimension of breastfeeding. This article discusses the reasons and consequences of early weaning.

METHODOLOGY

This basic study aims to generate new knowledge and help advance science, with no foreseen practical application. It involves universal truths and interests[6]. Early weaning has become a common occurrence in our society, and as a result, it is currently recognized as a public health issue[7].

It comprises an element of exploration, as it aims to provide greater familiarity with an issue and to enhance visibility to allow for inferencing, and another of description, since its purpose is to outline the characteristics of a given population or phenomenon and establish correlations between the studied variables[8]. Additionally, it includes a qualitative approach that considers the social aspects and significance of early weaning in detail[8].

A field survey was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire of 25 questions to describe the population of interest, their perceptions of breastfeeding, and the reasons and consequences of early weaning.

The following inclusion criteria were adopted: being a mother of a child up to six months of age; agreeing to participate in the study; introducing mixed foods to the infant before the child turned six months old; and residing in the area covered by the survey. Mothers who exclusively breastfed for more than six months and lactating women not interested in joining the study were excluded. Data collection occurred from August to October 2023.

Since this is a field study, the interviews were conducted following approval from a Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent before joining the study, as required by Resolution no. 466/2012 of the Brazilian National Health Council, which is designed to protect individuals participating in scientific research. The information obtained was used solely for the study's purposes, and participants' privacy was safeguarded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The fourteen women included in the study completed the questionnaire from August to October 2023.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participating mothers. The majority of the participants were housewives (50%), with a median age of 28 and a high school education (57.14%). Regarding marital status, 50% were single, and 50% were married.

Participant responses were categorized and discussed around four topics, as presented below.

The socioeconomic context

Various social factors can influence breastfeeding and contribute to its interruption. Some authors found that young mothers tend to wean their babies early on[9]. Nevertheless, our study primarily enrolled adults, indicating that breastfeeding interruption is a reality affecting all age groups.

Higher levels of education tend to correlate with longer, uninterrupted breastfeeding. The literature shows that literate mothers have greater access to information about the importance of lactation, which is a predictor of exclusive breastfeeding success[11]. Interestingly, most mothers in our study had a high school degree and were aware of the superiority of breast milk over other foods in early life, but they still opted to wean their babies. Although education may be necessary for the continuation of breastfeeding, it may not be a strong enough factor to guarantee exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life across all social contexts.

The paternal relationship can also influence the type of food provided to the child, as their support and level of education can affect the maintenance of a healthy diet. In our study, 50% of the mothers were single, 50% were married or living with a partner, and only 57.14% had a primary education degree. Half of the women probably did not have full paternal support, and many of those in a relationship had partners with low levels of education. Therefore, this reinforces the idea that dysfunctional families, characterized by the absence of a paternal figure or spouse and/or a lower level of education, can be a significant predisposing factor for early weaning.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Number	Age (Years)	Marital status	Education	Occupation
1	20	Single	High school	Housewife/confectioner
2	21	Married	High school	Self-employed/Loan agency
3	22	Single	High school	Formally employed/seamstress
4	23	Single	High school	Housewife
5	24	Married	Incomplete elementary	Housewife/hairdresser
6	28	Married	High school	Formally employed
7	28	Single	Incomplete elementary	Housewife
8	28	Single	College	Housewife
9	32	Married	Incomplete high school	Housewife
10	35	Married	College	Dentist
11	37	Single	Elementary	Unemployed/general services assistant
12	40	Married	High school	Formally employed/general services assistant
13	42	Single	High school	Housewife
14	53	Married	High school	Civil servant/Community health agent and nursing technician

Source: Survey organized by the author. Aug-Oct 2023.

Regarding occupation or profession, most mothers (50%) had been away from work for less than six months, 14.28% for more than six months, and 35.71% responded "not applicable" to this question. Mothers with jobs were predominantly away from work for less than six months, corroborating data from the literature[12] on the impact on breastfeeding and returning to work within six months of giving birth. Although most women identified as housewives, the social perceptions surrounding not having a job or social security and engaging in household chores may have negatively impacted early weaning in this population.

Pregnancy

The literature describes a history of pregnancy as a factor influencing a mother's decision to maintain her infant on exclusive breastfeeding; first-time mothers and women who have never had children tend to wean their infants early[10]. In our study, most mothers were multiparous, had no difficulty getting pregnant, and had desired pregnancies. However, early weaning was identified not only among first-time mothers but also in mothers with experience breastfeeding, indicating that previous experience is not a preponderant factor in maintaining breastfeeding.

Mothers' perceptions of breastfeeding

All participants indicated that they had information on breastfeeding. Most reported obtaining this information at a health center (pregnancy group, prenatal care, community agent). When asked about their reasons for breastfeeding, the responses were as follows[15]: "breast milk is better for my child;" "it is good for the mother's health;" "it helps you save money;" "because I am close to my child;" "because my child did not accept the bottle." Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned "social obligation or the father of the child told me to," an element frequently described in the literature to explain the relevance of the father's support in maintaining breastfeeding[13].

Although the mothers reported being knowledgeable about the subject, half answered incorrectly when asked what exclusive breastfeeding means. According to the literature, exclusive breastfeeding means feeding an infant with mother's milk only up to six months of age without adding other foods [6]. When asked who benefits from breastfeeding, a significant portion responded that only the baby does. One might infer that maternal perceptions of breastfeeding are incomplete since both can benefit from it[14].

Early weaning

Most mothers included in the study understood the meaning of early weaning—when breastfeeding is interrupted before the child is six months old—and were also aware of the possible complications associated with weaning.

When asked why they weaned their infants early, the mothers included in the study cited breast problems, an inability to produce enough milk, a partner's request, the child not gaining enough weight, and hospitalization after birth. None referenced maternal or filial disease, or the use of medication that contraindicates breastfeeding, as noted in other studies[14]. Others stated that "[...] it was time to wean" because "[...] I needed to work," "I went back to work two months after the baby was born," and "I had breastfeeding problems" as obstacles.

Surprisingly, when asked who told them to feed their children something other than breastmilk, most mothers

said the advice came from a health professional. Instead of encouraging breastfeeding, these professionals did not educate or support lactating mothers. Other sources advising on introducing solid foods included the child's father and relatives, such as the mother, aunt, and grandmother.

As described in other studies on the subject, mothers who wean their children early often transition to infant formula, cow's milk, fruits, vegetables, and greens[15].

Regarding complications, early weaning can contribute to the appearance of several illnesses[16]. In the present study, the mothers reported that their children developed "itchy skin," "asthmatic bronchitis," that they "get sick frequently," and that they have "difficulty pooping;" when asked if these problems ever hindered breastfeeding, they said they did not since they appeared after they stopped breastfeeding. This does not prevent the health problems mentioned from being a consequence of weaning, as these illnesses may not occur immediately.

Interestingly, most mothers do not feel guilty about having weaned their child early. Some stated that "[...] the mother's mental health comes first!" and that it was the "[...] milk that dried up." Some expressed feelings of guilt, stating that "[...] I listened to others and now I regret it, I don't think my baby had trouble gaining weight like the doctor said," or regret "[...] because my daughter has bronchitis and constipation." The perceptions mothers develop about weaning are contextual and often derived from a place of psychosocial exhaustion in which regret is absent or from biological consequences that induce guilt.

This study has a few limitations. Given its qualitative nature, results cannot be extrapolated to different populations due to sampling bias. Breastfeeding women who are more socially vulnerable due to their younger age and lower education levels may have chosen not to join the study.

Final considerations

This study reinforces the importance of exclusive breastfeeding by reviewing its positive aspects for both the child and the nursing mother. Additionally, it seeks to highlight factors that may negatively impact breastfeeding by interviewing nursing women who weaned early and examining their effects on the child's health.

It also described the challenges nursing women faced in continuing to breastfeed, including difficulty latching on due to breast problems, low milk production, partners urging them to stop breastfeeding, the child's struggle to gain weight, and hospitalization.

However, some aspects raised by the interviewees are of great or greater relevance, such as the mother's education and age, which may affect the decision to continue to breastfeed for the first six months of the infant's life. Low paternal involvement and lower levels of education, as well as precarious employment conditions, may contribute to the discontinuation of breastfeeding.

Furthermore, health professionals must be more sensitive to nursing women and provide enhanced support for breastfeeding. As stipulated by the Family Health Strategy, this requires time and relationship building.

Public health impacts on infants include respiratory, dermatological, and gastrointestinal conditions and weakened mother-child bonding.

This study raised aspects mentioned by Primary Care users. The collected social and demographic data allowed for the analysis of specific associations. Further studies are needed to draw broader conclusions about the issues discussed in this article.

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