

# *How I Weaned Myself*

By Clare Meehan (who weaned herself),  
in conjunction with Susan Stephenson, 1994

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The following are the hypothetical words of Clare Meehan as she was nursed and weaned herself in the first year of her life. I would like to thank her parents for taking such good notes on her weaning process, and for sending photos and even a video of her first "formal" meal. There are several pictures of Clare in Michael Olaf's *The Joyful Child, for Birth to Three*.

The rest of the information in this article is from lectures of the Assistants to Infancy course, for ages birth to three years.

There is a natural fear of "weaning a child" too early or too late for her healthy development. In the ideal situation the child is not "weaned" but only offered support to develop abilities at the optimum times and then allowing her to wean herself. The discovery of these times, these "sensitive periods", is the result of observations of thousands of children over many years, first in Italy and then the rest of the world.

These observations were and are carried out by Montessori Assistants to Infancy whose purpose always is to discover the optimum time to offer a new experience to a child. We offer, and then watch carefully, to discover the child's interest and ability. So the weaning stages are always dictated by the individual child. We are not trying to adapt the baby to an adult or societal schedule, or according to any preconceived ideas about when a child "should" learn to feed her self or to stop nursing.

The elements—experience, tools, and abilities—which enable a child to feed herself are introduced at the optimum time, but it is the child who decides when to stop nursing.

**CLARE:** *From the first day on my mother devoted her undivided attention to me whenever I was nursing. I studied her face and she smiled at me as I had my meal. We had a large comfortable chair in my room just for being together.*

## **THE FIRST THREE MONTHS:**

***A good attachment is the best preparation for a good detachment.***

—Dr. Silvana Montanaro, M.D.,  
Montessori Teacher Trainer

The child receives emotional satisfaction from breastfeeding when the mother provides eye contact throughout each meal, no phone, book, conversation with others to distract her from this important time with her child. Psychiatrists affirm that this social and emotional experience provides a firm foundation for future relationships in the child's life.

From the beginning, we help the child to understand that the breast (food) is NOT the answer to every problem. If a child cries or seems to be uncomfortable or unhappy, we listen and watch to see what the problem is, and observe carefully to see if she is solving it herself or if she really needs our help.

Sometimes a crying child just wants to hear a voice, or have a gentle touch. We can check to see if she is wet or if she is lying on an uncomfortable fold of cloth. She might want a slight change of position, or fewer or more covers. She may be overstimulated by sounds or sights, or bored by the lack of these things. Sometimes, a child is just thinking about something that makes her angry or worried and she is expressing herself about it. We must respect the fact that she is able to solve some problems for herself.

We hold and cuddle her often, but make sure that she is not busy with something else, listening or watching, before we pick her up.

Nursing should occur because a child is hungry, and holding and cuddling because she wants and needs comfort—the two needs should not be confused.

**CLARE:** *For the first two months I was breastfed exclusively. During the third month my parents gave me the exciting new experience of a spoon and tiny tastes of juice. They did this at about the same time every single day because they knew that I was looking forward to this time of day and this daily new experience.*

## **THIRD MONTH:**

We introduce the experience of a little spoon, and tiny tastes of organic, seasonal, local fresh juice. The purpose is not to begin to wean, but to introduce the new experiences of spoon and tastes when children have shown to be most interested.

## **ESSENTIAL POINT:**

We only offer, we touch the spoon to the lips gently, we don't put it in her mouth.

We offer this new experience at first once, then twice a day, when the child is awake, about an hour before a breast meal. It can be done by the father or the mother. For the child's sense of order it should be done around the same time each day.

(A "tiny spoon," available from the *Michael Olaf* catalogue for birth to three years, *The Joyful Child*.)

## **METHOD:**

Holding the child in the arms, parent and child looking at each other, we simply touch to the baby's lips a tiny spoonful of juice. If and when the child opens the mouth let a tiny bit of juice go onto the tongue and let the baby taste it. We never force the spoon into the mouth and we respect the right of the child to refuse food. With the first taste the child might make a face because the juice is so different from sweet milk, but usually the juice will not be refused by the second or third day.

**CLARE:** *When I was about four and a half months old, my parents added the tastes of other foods, just tiny tastes, to my “juice-tasting” ritual. Some were good and some were not. They respected my choices.*

#### **FOURTH - FIFTH MONTH:**

In addition to nursing and the daily tastes of fruit juice, one or two spoonfuls of mashed egg yolk (from free-range chickens) may be offered at the end of one of the breastfeeding meals, perhaps early afternoon when the quantity of maternal milk is less. Boiled fish can be introduced and alternated with the egg.

**ESSENTIAL POINT:** Only offer, be prepared to give leftovers to the dog if baby is not interested.

**CLARE:** *When I was able to sit up a little and use my hands my parents gave me some special bread. I was very interested in grasping objects and putting them in my mouth and this was quite a treat.*

#### **FIFTH - SIXTH MONTH:**

Pieces of bread can be offered - two or three days old (or special baby bread that does not crumble) - cut into a shape that the child can keep in the hand and fit in the mouth. This can be given immediately after the breast, with the child in a comfortable position - kept almost sitting with the help of pillows. (This is better than in mother's arms because child's hands are completely free.) We can also put olive oil or tomato juice on this bread. This bread gives the child the experience of eating by herself, at her own pace, and of swallowing tiny pieces of solid food.

#### **SIGNS THAT THE CHILD IS GETTING READY, PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND INTELLECTUALLY, TO EAT IN OTHER WAYS:**

It appears that the fifth or sixth month is the beginning of the sensitive period for children weaning themselves naturally, and not having to be weaned by someone else. These are the signs that tell us that the child is getting ready to wean herself:

- The teeth begin to emerge.
- A sitting position is beginning to be possible, in parent's lap as she plays, and sometimes child is practicing getting into sitting position on her own.
- The prenatal supply of iron begins to run out.
- New digestive enzymes are produced.
- Many children lose interest in nursing at this time.

**CLARE:** *Sometime during my sixth month of life my parents brought home a beautiful little chair and table for me to learn to use to feed myself. I was getting frustrated because everyone else around me was sitting up at a table and chair and using forks and spoons and glasses and I wanted to do the same. I started being unhappy sometimes during meal times*

*because of this frustration. They set the table with a beautiful little table cloth and real china and glass. There was even a little vase with a flower and a small pitcher my mother or father used to fill my tiny glass (they called it a “shot” glass). I felt very honored.*

### **THE FIRST MEAL**

**AGE:** Sometime in the fifth or sixth month; follow the child.

#### **TIME OF DAY:**

This meal will substitute for one of the regular breastfeedings. Pick a time of day that will be regularly relaxing for the parent and the child, morning, afternoon or evening.

#### **POSITION OF THE CHILD:**

At this stage the child is usually not able to get into a sitting position on her own. We do not believe in putting babies into positions that they can not get to on their own. (i.e. walkers, swings, etc.) This would be a disrespect for her own developing abilities. However, this very short period of time of sitting up in a chair is preferable to being held up in the parent's lap (the usual method) because the child is free to use her hands, arms, whole body, from the midline, not the left or right side only, to experiment with feeding herself.

#### **MATERIALS:**

A little *weaning* or *first table* and *chair*. At first, if the child needs them, support pillows or rolled towels to keep her from slipping. Make it as cozy and secure as a parent's lap.

A cloth napkin and bib, to match the tablecloth. If the bib neck band fastens with velcro, off to one side, the child will learn to put her own bib on eventually. This is ideal.

A child-size table cloth

A non-plastic small bowl (metal or ceramic)

One small spoon.

Very soon after the first meal you will need two small spoons, and then two small forks. These are larger than the weaning spoon. The Michael Olaf set is perfect. You will want several of each in consideration for the child's sense of order, so you won't have to substitute if they are misplaced)

A weighted glass (a shot glass is good)

A small pitcher

A stool for the parent

The meal should be a relaxed, enjoyable experience for both parent and child. Seat the child in the weaning chair, in front of the small table and table cloth. The bib and napkin may or may not be used the first time, depending on the child.

#### **POSITION OF THE ADULT:**

Mother or father sits facing the child, on a stool at one side of the small table—close enough for security and far enough away so that child can be aware of - and proud of - her new ability and

independence. Offer tiny bits of food on the spoon and never insist on a particular quantity to be taken by the child. The child may reach and hold the spoon over your hand (not on her own at first) and this will give her the experience of what it feels like to put the food into her mouth. Keep the bowl back out of reach at first. This is usually enough for the first meal, but it depends on the child.

**ESSENTIAL POINTS:**

(1) Only offer this experience. If the child is not interested at all at this time, just clean everything up and wait patiently for a few days and offer it again.

(2) If she tires before she is full, complete the meal with breastfeeding. In just a few days she will be able to eat more without difficulty. We can then make the food more solid little by little.

*CLARE: I grabbed my mother's hand with the second bite. I thought I could do it myself but she gently held on and helped me so that the food, and not just the spoon, would make it all the way to my mouth. Then she offered a tiny bit of water in the bottom of my shot glass. It was thrilling! I yelled for more food and she gave it to me. I probably ate much more than I needed, but my mother could see that I was going to do this so she just put a small bit of food in each spoonful.*

**FURTHER STEPS:**

(1) Eventually the child can hold one spoon while the parent holds another, and gradually it is just the child using a spoon.

(2) Sometimes even with the first meal the child can begin to use the glass. Pour just a little water into it with the pitcher and hold it (with the child if she wants) to her mouth to sip. Gradually she will learn to hold it herself, you pouring from the small pitcher for quite some time.

**ESSENTIAL POINT:**

*Tippy* cups and bottles teach the wrong way to drink from a glass and the child has to learn all over later. We only use baby bottles if the mother is unable to nurse.

**WATER:**

When the child begins to eat solid foods it is very important to begin to offer water to avoid constipation. It should be offered during and at the end of each meal and should always be available to the child from now on. When the child is walking there should be a pitcher of water and a glass always available until she is able to get to and operate the tap by herself.

**FOOD SUGGESTIONS:**

In every country we adapt to what the family eats, perhaps beginning with a grain cereal in a vegetable broth, perhaps with

protein, and mashed fruit for desert (in a clean bowl of course). A typical first meal in Italy or the US might contain 1/4 cup of cream of brown rice, or semolina, cooked in 3/4 cup of vegetable broth, with a little olive oil and Parmesan cheese (or a little fish, or liver, or a half of an egg), followed by whatever organic fruit is in season.

*CLARE: I was at home during the day with my mother so she set my table beautifully and sat on a low stool with me every morning as I had my beautiful meals. By the time I was eight months old I could feed myself and drink from the glass alone. It was during this time that I started sitting at my table and having dinner before my parents had their dinner. My dad was usually home to sit with me. Sometimes both of them sat at my table with me for dinner.*

*Then I sat at a taller chair at the adult table with them for awhile at some meals, sometimes chewing on bread and watching them to see how they eat different foods. I loved to chew on slices of honeydew or cantaloupe. They talked with me as they ate, telling me about their days. Sometimes I got bored and wanted down. Then I played on a blanket on the floor nearby as they finished their meal.*

**SIXTH - SEVENTH MONTH:**

At this time we can offer to substitute a second breastfeeding meal with an additional solid meal. Tiny pieces of cooked vegetables can be mashed into the broth used for the meal. Tiny pieces of fish can also be offered.

**SEVENTH - EIGHTH MONTH:**

In addition to the two solid meals a milk product meal of yogurt and mashed fruit plus biscuits can replace another breastfeeding. Rice, small pasta, beans, lentils and a variety of fruits and vegetables - ideally locally available, organic, seasonal products - can be part of the menu.

By now the child will probably be using the fork as well. Be sure to offer food that can be handled by the child's tools, and breads to be held in the hand.

**NOTES:**

(1) Never insist upon food that the child does not want. Trust her instinct.

(2) Put just a small amount, or a few things in the bowl, or on the plate at a time and give more as soon as necessary.

(3) Weaning marks the beginning of a new stage of development because the child is no longer dependent upon the mother for food and her relationship with the environment expands and changes. Attention is paid to the child's self image and attitude toward food and meals, as well as her nutrition, in this method of weaning.

**CLARE:** *During my eleventh month I stopped nursing altogether. My mother never refused to nurse me but I was getting a lot of hugging and cuddling from both parents and grandparents and other friends and relatives so I didn't need to nurse to get snuggled. Eating by myself was so much fun and so delicious!*

#### **TENTH - TWELFTH MONTHS:**

The child will be eating virtually everything the rest of the family eats during three meals a day. She will be eating sometimes at her table and sometimes at the family table. She will wean herself completely from the breast at the right moment for her if the parents encourage this type of independence.

#### **EATING WITH THE FAMILY:**

In the beginning of the weaning process, the child should have her meals at a different time than the rest of the family. It is too stressful to manage both at the same time and the child will need the parent's attention and help for quite some time. However the child should be present at the adult's meal whenever she is interested, with a piece of bread to nibble on and a plate. She should have already eaten but joins the family for mealtime conversation and to learn about the process of eating together, manners, etc.

**CLARE:** *When I was fifteen months old I had learned to set my own table for some meals and snacks. There was a little tray in the kitchen with a pitcher of water and a little glass so that I could pour myself some water at any time during the day. I have a great "high" chair that I can climb into to sit at the tall table, where I have most of my meals now. I can use a spoon and fork and even serve myself from the serving dishes at meals. I still spill food and water sometimes but I am getting good at helping my parents clean up after meals.*

#### **THE HIGH CHAIR:**

This is not a traditional highchair which a child must be put into and taken out of by the adult. We must keep in mind the child's strong need to be independent and use a chair that the child will be able to get into and out of without our help as soon as she is able to walk and climb. A good example is the *Swedish High Chair* available from the Michael Olaf Company.

#### **THE WORK TABLE AND CHAIR:**

By now the child may be using the weaning chair and table as a work space as well. If possible it is ideal to have one table and chair just for eating and another table and chair in another part of the home for working. These should be of natural wood, with a finish or a light-colored paint that can be washed by the child.

Suggested dimensions are:

Height of seat: 6-8 inches

Height of table: 12-14 inches

#### **BOTTLES AND PACIFIERS:**

You will notice that at no time during this weaning process has either a bottle or a pacifier been recommended. We sometimes forget that humans existed for a long time without either. There are times when both can become necessary, when a mother is unable to nurse her child for example, or if she must return to work before the child has learned eat with a spoon and to drink from a glass, for example, but these cases are the exception and not the rule.

If we must use something to sooth the jaws or provide sucking, us something that must be held in place by the adult, so it does not become a permanent fixture. In deciding if a pacifier is really necessary keep in mind the implications of a child getting used to oral gratification, and what this can lead to later in life. Also consider the possible effects of the development of language, social interaction, and the teeth and jaw.

*I really enjoy being able to do the things that I see other people around me doing. I feel like I am important when I get to sweep and wash and set the table and fold napkins and arrange flowers for meals and do all the other work that I am learning.*

#### **A NOTE FROM CLARE'S MOTHER:**

Please mention our mistake of "nursing Clare to sleep" at night. In the uterus she had had lots of practice waking and going to sleep according to her mental and physical needs. Because I "taught" her to nurse herself to sleep she became dependent on this and lost touch with her natural ability to go to sleep whenever she was tired.

We were very careful not to do this with her baby brother, and to put him down when he finished nursing before he had fallen asleep whenever we could. We realized that it was unfair to teach a child to be absolutely dependent on any ritual at all for going to sleep - patting, walking, holding, being in our bed, and so forth. Because when we were unable to provide that ritual, or tired of it, or were not going to be home, Clare was unable to do a simple thing like going to sleep without us! It wasn't fair. As a result her brother goes to sleep happily whenever he feels the need.

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For more information on the Assistants to Infancy discoveries concerning the healthy development of children, see *Understanding the Human Being*, by Dr. Silvana Montanaro, and Michael Olaf Montessori overview and catalogue of materials for Birth to Three, *The Joyful Child*.

They can be ordered from:

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