

# BREASTFEEDING IMPROVES INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

**A program that encouraged mothers to breastfeed exclusively for at least four months and to continue breastfeeding, at least partially, for a year resulted in children with higher IQs. Once these children entered school, their teachers reported stronger aptitudes for reading and writing than for their peers.**

Those are the important results that Michael S. Kramer and his colleagues found after seven years of research and another three years of statistical analysis. Their study, known as the "Promotion of Breastfeeding Intervention Trial" (PROBIT), included 17,046 mother and baby pairs from 31 maternity hospitals and clinics in the Republic of Belarus. It is the largest randomized trial about breastfeeding ever conducted.

*"What's important about this study is that we figured out a way to separate the effects of breastfeeding from the different types of women, environments and cultural influences,"* says Kramer. *"It is less likely that children who were breastfed as babies will have intellectual problems."*

The study compared the babies of mothers who took part in a program designed to promote longer exclusive breastfeeding (the experimental group) with the babies of mothers who were not influenced in any way (the control group). All the mothers were of similar age, education and family history and had chosen to breastfeed before the study began.

Almost half (43%) of the women in hospitals that offered the program chose to exclusively breastfeed their babies until they reached three months old. Only 6% of those in hospitals without the program chose similar actions. After a year, almost 20% of the mothers in the experimental group were still breastfeeding, while only 11% of their peers were still doing so.

A total of 13,889 of the children were followed up to age six and a half. The children received pediatric exams plus verbal and

performance IQ tests when they were old enough. Once the children started school, their teachers were asked to rate their performance in reading, writing and mathematics. On average, the children in the experimental group had higher verbal IQ scores and higher teacher ratings in reading and writing tests than those in the control group. This follow-up was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

*"This article is really important because it's the first randomized study of its type,"* says Suzanne Dionne, a physician in Granby, Quebec, who is frequently asked to assist mothers struggling to breastfeed their infants. *"Those we've been relying on in the past were observational studies, so they weren't as strong. This study will be used in our family program and it should be used in the training of physicians."*

What the study can't tell us, however, is which of the three benefits of breastfeeding have the largest impact on cognitive development: the milk itself, skin-to-skin contact or the verbal contact between the mother and baby. *"One in four women struggles to breastfeed at first,"* explains Dionne. *"A mother who is breastfeeding exclusively at three months can easily continue up to six months, so I use the results of this study to encourage her to do so. For women who are struggling too much and want to stop, I tell*



***"It is less likely that children who were breastfed as babies will have intellectual problems."***

*them: go ahead and switch to formula if you have to; but hold your baby in your arms, next to your bare skin and talk as though you were actually breastfeeding." 🐾*

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Ref.: Kramer MS, Aboud F, Mironova E, Vanilovich I, Platt RW, Matush L, Igumnov S, Fombonne E, Bogdanovich N, Ducruet T, Collet JP, Chalmers B, Hodnett E, Davidovszky S, Skugarevsky O, Trofimovich O, Kozlova L, Shapiro S. Breastfeeding and child cognitive development: New evidence from a large randomized trial. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 2008;65(5):578-584.