

Breastfeeding linked to higher GCSE results: How to understand the nuance behind the numbers

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[Recently published research](#) has found a link between breastfeeding for longer and higher GCSE grades.

We know from [previous research](#) that across a whole population, [breastfeeding](#) can help [support](#) health and development. Babies who are breastfed are statistically less likely to develop certain [health issues](#), or—as in this study—slightly more likely to gain higher grades. But the key phrase is "likely".

No research has ever shown that a baby who is not breastfed will develop an illness, or that a baby who is breastfed will not. But nuance like this can go missing from headlines, like [those seen](#) when this [study was published](#). And so can recognition that [child development](#) is always more complex than whether a baby is breastfed or not, as multiple factors affect our health.

This is clear from the research study itself. It found that around one in six students in the study achieved a high pass in math and English. Within that, once factors such as maternal education and [social class](#) taken into account, babies who were breastfed for 12 months or more were around a third more likely to achieve a top grade in math and English than those never breastfed.

Given that only a minority achieved top grades, this translates to a small increased chance of top grades among babies breastfed for a year or more. Data for shorter durations, or other outcomes such as passing five GCSEs or more was less conclusive.

So, most children did not get a top grade, however they were fed. Some babies who were never breastfed achieved top grades.

Complex factors

On an individual level, once you also consider other factors that [could affect grades](#) but can't be measured in a study like this—things out of our control such as genetics, luck, and how hard a teen chooses to

revise—the difference will likely be even smaller. Certainly not at a level that should cause concern if you are reading this as a parent whose baby could not be breastfed.

Although it would be wrong to imply that breastfeeding never plays a role, it's more likely that it plays a role alongside many other [important factors](#) too.

Saying that, studies that show a small increase such as this are important, because they might persuade governments and other organizations that breastfeeding support is [worth investing in](#). There has been a [sustained failure](#) in understanding and supporting all aspects of infant feeding.

The [study itself](#) is well conducted and highlights its own limitations. But it has led to a multitude of news headlines stating that breastfed children [do better at school](#)—and [calling on mothers to breastfeed](#) to improve their children's grades.

The media interpretation has reignited feelings of grief and anger among those who feel let down by the dire [lack of investment](#) in infant feeding. The response [has been fierce](#).

For women who want to breastfeed, news articles like the ones that reported the new study do little to actually support parents to do so. The 2010 [infant feeding survey](#) found that around a third of women who had started breastfeeding stopped altogether in the first six weeks. Four out of five would have liked to [carry on for longer](#).

What use is knowing that breastfeeding could potentially improve your child's educational outcomes if the support that you need to do that is missing?

Many women stop for reasons outside their control, such as difficulty

accessing support to position their baby without pain, complications such as tongue tie, conflicting advice, exhaustion, health reasons, or milk supply issues.

Others feel [pressured into stopping](#) by family, have challenges [returning to work](#), or feel [criticized feeding in public](#). Some cannot breastfeed due to [health complications](#) meaning continuing to breastfeed would not have led to optimal outcomes for them.

I could cite a hundred reasons why women stop or do not breastfeed—but not knowing that breastfeeding could possibly, at a [population level](#), slightly increase their child's GCSE results would not be one of them.

It is also important to consider [why breastfeeding might be important](#) to women. In my research, [women have talked about](#) the importance of breastfeeding to them because their baby was premature or unwell, because of cultural or religious reasons, or a preference to care for their baby in a certain way. A simple desire for their body to work as they hoped.

Many can't put it in words. When breastfeeding doesn't work [women](#) can feel like they [lose much more](#) than hypothetical future good grades. It's not about GCSE grades, but rather expectations being shattered, tied up in a lack of promised support, [casual judgements](#) of your decisions, or a dismissal of how breastfeeding [mattered to you](#). Our main focus should be on ensuring that all new parents get the support they need now in navigating caring for their baby.

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