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## Australian Breastfeeding Association celebrates 50th anniversary

By Carolyn Webb



Mothers in arms: Emma Williams with her daughter Imogen visit Mary Paton in Darling Point. Photo: Kate Geraghty

The Australian Breastfeeding Association started with six mothers meeting in a suburban lounge room 50 years ago today.

It was 1964 and Mary Paton felt a failure for struggling to breastfeed her first baby, Brigid.

There was no one to talk to. She knew breastfeeding was good, but it was not common in her family, and multinationals promoted formula. After a drop in supply, a nurse advised weaning Brigid at four months.

A book proved the saviour. US author Karen Pryor's *Nursing Your Baby* mentioned breastfeeding support groups for American mothers run by the Le Leche League. "I thought, 'right, this is what we're going to do here,'" Mrs Paton said.

And so, on February 13, six friends converged on Mrs Paton's house in Balwyn North, Victoria. Fears were aired, tips dispensed and they discovered they had all had ups and downs. The group gave Mrs Paton confidence to breastfeed her next two children for more than 12 months.

The Nursing Mothers' Association, as the group called itself (switching to Australian Breastfeeding Association in 2001), met monthly, started a library and acted as unpaid counsellors.

Sometimes 20 people a day would ring her, often in the middle of the night, from as far as Canberra, saying "I don't have enough milk, what do I do?"

Today, the ABA has more than 230 branches, has a presence in every state, supports more than 80,000 mothers a year, and runs a 24-hour help line. There are 1100 trained volunteer counsellors.

In 1974, it published the first Australian book on breastfeeding, and it helped push for a law, passed in

1984, making it illegal to discriminate against women breastfeeding in public.

Mrs Paton said you would be labelled disgusting if you fed your baby in public in the early 1960s. If the baby was hungry, "you'd have to go home, run to a car or a ladies' toilet".

The ABA's biggest achievement "is the fact that breastfeeding now is far more accepted than it was previously", although even in some households the view that formula is easier than breast is passed down.

She called on employers to make it easier for mothers returning to work to breastfeed or express milk.

What has not changed is that "every new mother requires the shoulder of a more experienced mother", and young mum Emma Williams agreed. When her son Toby was born in 2010, he had problems latching on to the breast, and she worried if he was getting enough milk.

Her mother lives in England, so talking to other mothers on the help line and at meetings was a godsend.

"I was very keen to breastfeed but I didn't have a clue about it. It was daunting at first, and the ABA was really helpful in terms of getting my confidence up," Mrs Williams said. A new book on the ABA's history, *Nursing Mums*, will be launched at the University of Melbourne on Thursday night.

**Jill Barnard and Karen Twigg, *Nursing Mums: a history of the Australian Breastfeeding Association - 1964-2014* (published by ABA 2014).**