

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Baby-led Weaning

Gill Rapley and Tracey Murkett

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About the Book

Forget baby purées, ice cube trays and weaning spoons, and simply let your baby feed himself.

Baby-led Weaning explodes the myth that babies need to be spoon-fed and shows why self-feeding from the start of the weaning process is the healthiest way for your child to develop.

Baby-led weaning is a common sense, easy and enjoyable approach to feeding your child, and it:

- Helps to develop your baby's natural abilities, including hand-eye coordination and chewing
- Allows your baby to join in with family meals right from the start of the weaning process
- Encourages independence by allowing your baby to experiment with foods at his own pace
- Makes mealtimes more enjoyable and battles less likely

Baby-led Weaning is a practical and authoritative guide to introducing solid food, enabling your child to grow up a happy and confident eater.

Gill Rapley is one of the UK's leading authorities on infant feeding. Tracey Murkett is a freelance writer.

About the Authors

Gill Rapley has studied infant feeding and child development for many years. She worked as a health visitor for over 20 years and has also been a midwife and a voluntary breastfeeding counsellor. She developed the theory of baby-led weaning while studying babies' developmental readiness for solids as part of her Master's degree. She lives in Kent with her husband and has three grown-up children, all of whom tried their best to show her that they didn't need any help with solid foods.

Tracey Murkett is a writer and journalist. After following baby-led weaning with her own daughter, she wanted to let other parents know how enjoyable and stress-free mealtimes with babies and young children can be. She lives in London with her partner and their daughter, now aged six.

Baby-led Weaning

Helping your baby to
love good food

Gill Rapley & Tracey Murkett

Vermilion
LONDON

The information in this book has been compiled by way of general guidance in relation to the specific subjects addressed, but is not a substitute and not to be relied on for medical, healthcare, pharmaceutical or other professional advice on specific circumstances and in specific locations. Parents are advised to consult their health visitor, GP or other relevant healthcare practitioner if they are concerned about their baby's health or development and before changing, stopping or starting any medical treatment. So far as the authors are aware the information given is correct and up to date as at August 2008. Practice, laws, regulations and recommendations all change, and the reader should obtain up-to-date professional advice on any such issues. The authors and publishers disclaim, as far as the law allows, any liability arising directly or indirectly from the use, or misuse, of the information contained in this book.

This book is a work of non-fiction. Some of the names of people in the case studies have been changed solely to protect the privacy of others.

Introduction

The first time their baby eats solid food is a milestone for many parents – it's a new chapter in his life and it's exciting. And as he takes his first mouthful of food they are crossing their fingers and hoping that their baby will be a 'good eater'. They want him to enjoy food, to eat healthily, and they want to have easy, stress-free family mealtimes.

But many parents find the first few years of solid food are not much fun for either them or their child. They struggle with common problems, whether it's getting their baby to accept lumpy food, or coping with picky eating or mealtime battles with a toddler. Often families settle for separate mealtimes and different food for adults and children.

Most babies start their journey to grown-up eating by being spoon-fed their first mouthfuls of puréed food on a date decided by their parents. But what happens if you don't do it like this? What happens if you let your baby decide when and how to start solids? What happens if you let him handle 'proper' food himself instead of spoon-feeding him? In other words, what happens if you let your baby lead the way?

Well, like many families, you and your baby will almost certainly find the whole adventure more fun. He'll show you when he's ready to start, and he'll share your meals from the very beginning. He'll learn about healthy family food by tasting and testing it and by feeding himself – no

mush or purées but real food. And he'll be able to do all this from about six months onwards.

Baby-led weaning (BLW) will develop your baby's chewing skills, manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination. With your help, he'll discover a wide range of healthy foods and learn important social skills. And he'll eat only as much as he needs, making him less likely to be overweight when he is older. But most of all, he'll enjoy it – and he'll be happy and confident at mealtimes as a result.

Baby-led weaning is safe, natural and easy – and, like most good ideas in parenting, it's not new. Parents the world over have discovered it for themselves, simply by watching their babies. Baby-led weaning works whether your baby is breastfed, formula-fed or having a mixture of the two. And, according to parents who have tried both BLW and spoon-feeding, letting your baby lead the way is much easier and more enjoyable all round.

Of course, there's nothing revolutionary about giving babies finger foods from six months. What's different about BLW is that the baby has *only* finger foods, making purées and spoon-feeding a thing of the past.

This book will show you why BLW is the logical way to introduce solids and why trusting your baby's skills and instincts makes sense. It will provide you with practical tips for getting started and the low-down on what to expect. It will let you in to one of the best-kept secrets of stress-free parenting.

With BLW there's no programme to follow and no stages to complete. Your baby won't have to work his way through a series of smooth purées, mashed and lumpy meals before he's allowed to eat 'real' food – and you won't have to follow a complicated daily timetable of meals. Instead you'll be able to relax and enjoy your baby's adventures with food.

Most books on introducing solids contain recipes and menu planners; this book is different. It's more about *how*

to let your baby feed himself rather than *what* to offer him. Planning ‘baby meals’ assumes that babies can’t have ordinary family food or that their food has to be prepared separately. But most meals in any healthy cookbook can be adapted easily so that your six-month-old baby can share them. As long as your own diet is healthy and nutritious there’s no need for separate recipes.

We have, however, included some suggestions for good first foods and foods to avoid, to help you get started. And, because many parents see BLW as an opportunity to look at what *they* eat, we’ve provided guidelines on how to ensure a healthy and balanced diet for the whole family. So if you’ve been living on junk food or ready meals, you can use this book to help you to turn over a new leaf.

Baby-led weaning can be great fun for you and your baby. If you haven’t seen any other babies start solids this way, you will probably be amazed at how quickly your baby becomes skilled at handling different foods and how adventurous he is with new tastes compared with other children. Babies are *happier* doing things for themselves – and it helps them learn.

Many parents who have used a baby-led approach have shared their experiences with us to help us write this book. Some had found spoon-feeding difficult in the past; others had turned to BLW in frustration when their six-month-old baby refused to be spoon-fed. Some were first-time parents who were attracted by BLW’s reputation as a gentle and common-sense way to introduce solids. What we heard time and time again was that their babies absolutely loved it, and that they became – and remained – happy and sociable eaters.

We hope this book will help you to discover just how easy the transition to family meals can be, and how using a baby-led approach can provide the foundation for a lifetime of healthy, enjoyable eating for your baby.

Note: Throughout this book we've tried to be fair to boys and girls by alternating 'he' and 'she', chapter by chapter. No difference between boys and girls is implied.

1

What is Baby-led Weaning?

‘For most parents mealtimes seem to be a nightmare. With Emily that’s one major battle we just don’t have to face. We really enjoy mealtimes. Food is not an issue at all.’

Jess, mother of Emily, 2 years

‘It’s so much easier to introduce the same food that everyone else is eating. I just don’t worry about whether or not Ben will eat something the way I did with the others when I was spoon-feeding. This feels so natural – and so much more enjoyable.’

Sam, mother of Bella, 8 years, Alex, 5 years, and Ben, 8 months

What is Weaning?

WEANING IS THE gradual change that a baby makes from having breastmilk or formula as her only food to having no breastmilk or formula at all. This changeover takes *at least* six months but may – especially with breastfeeding – last several years. This book is about the beginning of the weaning process, which starts with the baby’s very first mouthful of solid food.

These first solids – sometimes called complementary foods – are not meant to take over from breastmilk or

formula but to add to (or 'complement') it, so that the baby's diet becomes gradually more varied.

In most families, weaning is led by the parents. When they start to spoon-feed their baby, they are deciding when and how she starts solids; when they stop offering the breast or bottle they are deciding when to end milk feeds. You could call it parent-led weaning. Baby-led weaning (BLW) is different. It allows the baby to lead the whole process, using her instincts and abilities. She determines when weaning should start and finish. Although this may sound odd, it makes perfect sense when you look closely at how babies develop.

Why BLW is Different

When people think about introducing a baby's first solid foods, they usually picture an adult with a spoon and a few teaspoonfuls of puréed carrot or apple. Sometimes the baby will open her mouth eagerly to take the spoon - but she is just as likely to spit the food out, push the spoon away, cry or refuse to eat. Many parents resort to games - 'Here comes the train!' - in an effort to persuade the baby to accept food, which is often different from the family meals and given at a different time.

In the western world this approach to feeding babies is very rarely questioned and most people take it for granted that spoon-feeding is the normal way to go about weaning. And yet dictionary definitions for spoon-feeding include: 'to provide (someone) with so much help or information that they do not need to think for themselves'¹ and 'to treat (another) in a way that discourages independent thought or action'.² Baby-led weaning, on the other hand, encourages a baby's confidence and independence by following *her* cues. Solid feeding starts when the baby demonstrates that she can feed herself, and progresses at her unique pace. It

allows her to follow her instincts to copy her parents and her brothers and sisters and to develop her feeding skills in a natural, fun way, learning as she goes.

If they are given the chance, almost all babies will show their parents that they are ready for something other than milk simply by grabbing a piece of food and taking it to their mouths. They don't need their parents to decide when weaning should start and they don't need to be spoon-fed; babies can do it themselves.

This is what happens in BLW:

- The baby sits with the rest of the family at mealtimes, and joins in when she is ready.
- She is encouraged to explore food as soon as she is interested, by picking it up with her hands – it doesn't matter whether or not she manages to eat any at first.
- Food is offered in pieces that are the size and shape that the baby can handle easily, rather than as purées or mashed food.
- She *feeds herself* from the start, rather than being spoon-fed by someone else.
- It's up to the baby how much she eats, and how quickly she widens the range of foods she enjoys.
- The baby continues to have milk feeds (breastmilk or formula) whenever she wants them and she decides when she is ready to begin reducing them.

The first experiences of eating solid food can have an impact on the way a baby feels about mealtimes for many years, so it makes sense to make them enjoyable. But weaning for many babies – and their parents – isn't much fun. Of course, not *all* babies mind being spoon-fed in the conventional way, but many appear to resign themselves to it rather than truly enjoy it. On the other hand, babies who

are allowed to feed themselves and eat with the family seem to love mealtimes.

‘When Ryan was about six months I went out with a group of mums with babies the same age. The mothers were busy spooning purée into their babies and wiping round their mouths with the spoon, making sure every bit went in. They seemed to be making their lives so hard, and you could see the babies weren’t enjoying it.’

Suzanne, mother of Ryan, 2 years

Why BLW Makes Sense

Babies and children crawl, walk and talk when they are ready. These developmental milestones won’t happen any sooner and – *provided babies are given the opportunity* – they won’t happen any later than the right time for that baby. When you put your newborn baby on the floor to have a kick you are giving her the opportunity to roll over. When she can, she will. You’re also providing her with the opportunity to get up and walk. That may take a bit longer. But keep on providing the opportunity and she will do it eventually. Why should feeding be any different?

Healthy babies are able to feed themselves from their mother’s breast as soon as they are born. By the time they are about six months old they are able to reach out and grab pieces of food and take them to their mouths. We’ve always known that they can do this and, for many years, parents have been encouraged to introduce finger foods from about six months. But there is now evidence to show that babies shouldn’t be having *any* solids before this age (see below). Since babies can begin to feed themselves with finger foods from six months, there seems to be no need for puréed foods at all.

However, even though we now know that babies have both the instinct and the ability to feed themselves at the right time, spoon-feeding is still the way most babies are fed during their first year – and sometimes for much longer.

When Should a Baby Start Solids?

The current recommended age for starting solid foods is six months. Before this, digesting anything other than milk feeds is difficult for babies. Giving solids earlier than six months is not good for babies because:

- Solid foods are not as densely packed with nutrients and calories as breastmilk or formula. Young babies have small tummies and need a concentrated, easily digestible source of calories and nutrients for healthy growth; only breastmilk or formula can provide this.
- The baby's digestive system isn't able to get all the goodness out of solid foods, so they pass through her without giving her proper nourishment.
- If she has solids too early, the baby's appetite for milk feeds goes down, so she gets even less nourishment.
- Babies who are given solid foods early get more infections and are at more risk of developing allergies than those who stay on milk feeds until six months, because their immune systems are immature.

Feeding babies solid foods earlier than six months has also been found to make them more prone to risk factors for heart disease in later life, such as high blood pressure.

Six months became the officially recommended minimum age for the introduction of solids in the UK in

2003, a year after the World Health Organization recommended that all babies should, if possible, have nothing but breastmilk until they are six months old, and that solid foods should be introduced gradually from then on.³

Knowing when to start solids

False signs of readiness

Over the years parents have been told to watch out for a variety of signs to help them work out when their baby is ready for solid food. Most are just part of normal development, linked to the baby's age, not to her readiness for other foods. And there are some other 'signs of readiness' that are equally unreliable as guides to starting solids, yet are still thought by many people to show that something more than milk is needed:

- *Waking at night.* Many parents start solids early in the hope that this will help their baby to sleep through the night. They assume that she is waking because she is hungry; but babies wake at night for all sorts of reasons and there is no evidence that giving them solids solves the problem. If they *are* genuinely hungry, babies under six months need to be offered more breastmilk (or formula, if they are formula-fed), not solids.
- *Weight gain slowing slightly.* This is a common reason for parents to be advised to start solids early, but research has shown this is something that normally happens at around four months, especially in breastfed babies.⁴ It's not a sign that they need solids.

- *Watching their parents eat.* From about four months babies are fascinated by everyday family activities, such as dressing, shaving, cleaning teeth – and eating. But they don't understand what these things mean – they're just curious.
- *Making lip-smacking noises.* Babies who are learning how to use their mouths enjoy practising these skills, which are as much about learning to talk as they are about eating. They're part of a baby's early preparation for solid foods but they don't mean she's ready to start.
- *Not going straight to sleep after milk feeds.* Babies of about four months are more alert and wakeful than younger babies; they simply need less sleep.
- *Small baby.* When babies are small it's either because they are meant to be small or because they need more nourishment. But, if they are under six months, it's breastmilk or formula they need to help them 'catch up', not solids. The exception to this is babies who are born very prematurely, some of whom may need extra nutrients earlier than six months ([see here](#)).
- *Big baby.* Babies who are born big (or who get big very quickly) don't need extra food. They are big either because of their genetic make-up or, in some cases (especially if they are formula-fed), because they are already having more milk than they really need. Their digestive and immune systems are no more mature than any other babies', so the health risks of giving solids early are just the same. The idea that big babies need food earlier is left over from the 1950s and 1960s, when it was mistakenly

believed that once a baby reached a certain weight (commonly 12 lb/5.5 kg), she needed solid foods. Milk is all a baby needs for the first six months – however big or small she is. *Size doesn't matter.*

‘I’ve never understood why people say: “Oh, he’s big, he needs more, you should give him solids,” because the food most people start with – pear, steamed courgette and carrot – those are things you would eat if you were going on a diet.’

*Holly, mother of Ava, 7 years, Archie, 4 years, and
Glen, 6 months*

True signs of readiness

The most reliable way to tell whether your baby is ready for solid foods is to look for signs that coincide with the important changes within her body that will enable her to cope with them (that is, the development of her immune and digestive systems, and the growth and development of her mouth). If she can sit up with little or no support, reach out to grab things and take them to her mouth quickly and accurately, and if she is gnawing on her toys and making chewing movements, then the chances are she is ready to start exploring solid foods.

But the very best sign that a baby is ready is when she starts to put food into her mouth herself – which she can only do if she is given the opportunity.

‘When the child on your lap grabs a handful of your dinner from your plate, chews it and swallows it then it might be time to push the plate nearer to her.’

Gabrielle Palmer, nutritionist and author

Why is Some Baby Food Labelled as Suitable from Four Months?

Back in 1994, when the UK Department of Health changed their recommendation for the minimum age for the introduction of solid foods from three months to four months, a law was quickly passed to prevent the manufacturers of foods and drinks for babies from suggesting that their products could be given to babies under four months old.

Since the recommended minimum age changed from four months to six months in 2003 ([see here](#)), there hasn't been another change in the law, so manufacturers of baby foods and drinks are free to continue to promote their products for babies as young as four months. The result is that many parents are confused – they don't know that the official recommendation has changed or, if they do, they don't realise why it's so important that babies under six months shouldn't be given anything other than breastmilk or infant formula. So they continue to buy baby food for babies who are really too young to have it.

A voluntary code of conduct (the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes*⁵) restricts the promotion of *any* food or drinks for babies under six months old and almost all countries of the world have signed up to it. But in many countries, including the UK, much of the International Code remains voluntary – in other words, it doesn't *have* to be followed by the food industry. So, until the law is changed, some baby food will continue to be labelled as 'suitable from four months'.

BLW STORY

MAX HAS ALWAYS been big for his age, 98th centile. So I was always hearing from people about big babies, how they

would be getting extra hungry, and need solids from four months, and so on. But I just let myself be guided by him.

And despite being a big baby, he didn't seem to really get into food. I could tell from his nappies that he was probably eating something from about eight months, but I don't think he was eating lots until about 10 months.

I really saw the first six months of BLW as just being for him to explore tastes and textures, so I didn't worry about the fact that, compared to my friends who were feeding purées, I couldn't really tell how much he was eating. I think feeding this way took the pressure off, really. I'd tried spoon-feeding my nephews, and there was a certain amount they were supposed to eat from the pot, and I found it very stressful when they just decided to stop.

With BLW you have to be a bit relaxed about it, initially, and let them take it at their own pace. It's quite easy to just assume they're not eating anything, and that they're going to be starving, and that you need to feed them something. I used to think: 'Why am I worrying? Breastmilk is much more nutritious for him than half a carrot.' I assumed that he was getting whatever nutrition he needed from the breastmilk. And breastfeeding fitted in so easily around the mealtimes. He just fed whenever he wanted to and it just all slotted together.

Charlotte, mother of Max, 16 months

Baby-led Weaning Isn't New

You may be reading this and thinking, 'I did that - it's nothing new.' If so, you're right - BLW *isn't* new, but talking about it is.

Many parents, especially those who have three or more children, have discovered almost by accident that letting the baby take the lead makes life easier and more

enjoyable for everyone. Mostly, their story goes something like this: they did as they were told with their first baby, finding that weaning required a lot of patience for very little reward. They relaxed a bit with the second child, breaking some of the 'rules' and discovering that weaning seemed a bit easier as a result. By the time their third baby was born they were so busy they just 'let her get on with it'.

The first child – spoon-fed according to all the guidelines – turned into quite a fussy eater. The second baby was a bit less picky, but the third baby became a noticeably 'better' eater than the other two – less fussy and more adventurous. The parents had discovered BLW. Unfortunately, because they were worried that they would be thought bad parents – or even just plain lazy – they didn't tell anyone.

'The more people I talk to, the more I realise that introducing solids this way is not a new idea. So many people say: "Actually, I did that, I just didn't talk about it." Parents have been doing this for years – it just didn't have a name.'

Clare, mother of Louise, 7 months

A Brief History of Feeding Babies

Historically, not a great deal is known about how babies were introduced to solids much before the late 19th century; parenting skills and knowledge were passed from mother to daughter, with very little written down. But it is likely that, as today, many families discovered BLW for themselves. And although anecdotal evidence suggests that, throughout the 20th century, at least some families introduced solids this way, the story was very different for the majority of babies.

At the turn of the century, babies didn't have any solid foods until they were around eight or nine months old; by the 1960s this had dropped to as early as two or three months, and by the 1990s most babies were having solids from around four months old. Many of these changes came about because of changes in the way babies were breastfed; there was little sound research into infant feeding and, until 1974, no official guidelines on introducing solids.

'My grandma thought it was great when she saw Rosy feeding herself. She was the eldest of seven children and she said that was the way she remembered her mother feeding her younger brothers and sisters. She couldn't remember any spoon-feeding at all. She said she'd only spoon-fed my mum because she was told to start at three months.'

Linda, mother of Rosy, 22 months

In the early 1900s babies had only breastmilk – either from their own mother or from a wet-nurse (a woman employed by parents to breastfeed their baby) – for about eight or nine months, or even longer. Although smooth bones or hard-baked crusts would sometimes be given from around seven or eight months, these were intended only as a way of developing chewing skills or to help with teething, not as 'food'. Recommended first foods were usually mutton or beef broth, fed by spoon.

As wet-nursing became less and less popular, doctors started to see it as their role to advise mothers on how to breastfeed their own babies. Leaving things to the instinct of the mother – or even worse, her baby – was thought to be unreliable and feeding began to be carefully controlled from the minute the baby was born.

Although breastfeeding was recognised as the best way to feed babies, the fact that they need to feed frequently for

their mothers to make enough milk wasn't understood. Mothers were told to follow a strict timetable, limiting the time the baby spent at the breast and spacing feeds several hours apart. As a result, many 'failed' to produce enough milk - and their babies 'failed' to thrive. No surprise, then, that the few substitute milks available at the time began to grow in popularity and to be recommended by doctors, in an effort to make sure babies got all the nutrients they needed.

As 'by the clock' feeding became more widespread and more mothers turned to the new infant milks, it became clear to doctors that these products weren't as good for babies as their advertisements suggested. Babies fed on these milks frequently got sick or were under-nourished and the feeds were often complicated to make up, so mistakes were common.

Since most mothers still preferred to start their babies on the breast, even if (because of the regimented feeding schedules) they were only 'able' to feed them for a few months, doctors - and the authors of the newly popular parenting books - saw the answer as encouraging breastfeeding from birth but introducing 'solid' foods (which were, of course, semi-solid) as soon as it was clear that the mother's breast-milk was no longer 'enough' - usually when the baby was somewhere between two and four months of age. Chubbiness was seen as a sign of good health and mothers were urged to 'fatten up' their babies, so most first foods were cereal-based, with porridge and rusks particularly popular.

At around the same time, pre-prepared sieved or 'strained' foods were appearing in the shops and, by the 1930s, a variety of fruit and vegetable-based baby foods was available in tins and jars. These were intended for babies from about six months onwards but it was found that they could just as easily be fed to younger babies.

Once babies were routinely being given ‘solid’ foods from well before the age they could chew, the practice of introducing bones and crusts declined. And, although the need to introduce foods that were closer to family meals was still acknowledged, babies usually progressed to lumpy foods given by spoon, rather than being given foods that they could hold.

In the 1960s it was recognised that babies needed to practise chewing food and moving it around their mouths if they were to become good at it and parents were encouraged to introduce finger foods from around six months. However, because it was assumed that babies needed to get used to very soft foods *before* they could learn to chew, most people believed they had to start purées well before six months in order to be able to move on to chewable foods at the right time.

When the first official guidelines were issued in 1974, most babies of three months were already having something other than milk feeds (usually ‘baby’ rice or porridge, or rusk). The guidelines said that babies shouldn’t be given any solid foods until they were at least four months old and that they should all be having some other foods by the time they reached six months. This advice was confirmed in 1994 and remained the official recommendation for UK babies until 2003, when the current recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding (or formula-feeding) until six months was announced.

BLW STORY

WHEN I HAD my daughter I instinctively decided I wasn’t going to do solids until she was ready. I’d had such a miserable experience with my first child, Jack, trying to start him on solids at four months. But that was the guidance at the time (he’s now 21). Now, of course, I

realise that he wasn't developmentally or psychologically up to it. He hated it.

Anna was perfectly happy just breastfeeding, so I just didn't bother with purées at all. We didn't go to the clinic very much, but if they asked me, I just lied. I remember her eight-month check, and I said: 'Yes, she's on three meals a day, she's loving it,' when in reality, she'd only helped herself to a few bits and pieces of food that the rest of us were eating. She went straight from breastmilk to picking up food and eating it. There were no stages; no fine purée, then mash, then lumps.

This was 16 years ago – most babies would have been on three full meals by the time they were six months. People who knew I wasn't spoon-feeding her were confused, but they could see that she was fine. They probably just thought I was lazy. And when Anna did start eating, when she was a bit over eight months, everyone could see she was managing normal food perfectly well, and that she was quite happy.

*Lizzie, mother of Jack, 21 years, Anna, 16 years, and
Robert, 13 years*

The Trouble with Spoon-feeding

Imagine you are six months old. You enjoy copying whatever you see your family doing and you want to grab the things they are handling to find out what they are. As you watch your parents eating, you're fascinated by the smells, shapes and colours. You don't understand that they are eating because they're hungry; you simply want to have a go at whatever it is they're doing – that's how you learn. But instead of allowing you to join in, your parents insist on putting something mushy into your mouth with a spoon. The mush is always the same consistency but the taste