

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Baby-led Weaning Cookbook

Gill Rapley and Tracey Murkett

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About the Book

Packed full of simple and delicious recipes to share with the whole family

Baby-led Weaning is a common sense, easy and enjoyable approach to introducing your baby to solid foods, allowing him to join in with family meals right from the start.

With over 130 tasty recipes and beautifully illustrated throughout, *The Baby-led Weaning Cookbook* also includes:

- simple advice on how to start weaning and what to expect
- essential at-a-glance information on nutrition and food safety
- ideas for quick snacks and lunches, as well as desserts and family dinners

About the Authors

Gill Rapley was a health visitor for 20 years and used her masters degree to begin her research into babies' experiences with solid foods.

Tracey Murkett is a freelance writer who followed baby-led weaning with her daughter, now aged five.

Their first book, *Baby-led Weaning: Helping Your Baby to Love Good Food* (Vermilion, 2008), has inspired many families to follow baby-led weaning.

The Baby-led Weaning Cookbook

Over 130 delicious recipes for the whole family to enjoy

GILL RAPLEY &
TRACEY MURKETT



Vermilion
LONDON



Introduction

THE BABY-LED WEANING COOKBOOK is for parents who want to introduce their baby to the pleasure of family mealtimes and eating good, healthy food. It's about preparing and cooking simple, nutritious meals so that your baby can join you at the table and feed himself when he is ready, eating what everyone else is eating.

Your baby's first experiences of solid food won't be puréed 'baby food', spoon-fed to him by someone else. Instead he'll pick up pieces of real food himself, feel them in his hand, sniff them, taste them and – gradually – learn to eat them.

Starting solids this way is easy, enjoyable and stress-free for the whole family. It is part of your baby's natural development, giving him the chance to learn new skills and grow in confidence. Sharing your own meals with your baby is quicker than preparing separate purées and cheaper than buying them ready-made. And it's much more fun.

This isn't a book full of 'finger foods'; all the recipes – with their rich variety of taste and textures, from Colourful Stir-fry Salad to Shepherd's Pie – can be adapted easily so that your baby will be able to join in, even when he is just getting started. Nothing has to be cut into smiley shapes to 'tempt' him, and there are no 'hidden' vegetables to trick him. It's good family food that your baby can share and everyone will enjoy.

The dishes are easy to make, tasty and nutritious, but they aren't 'ours'; they have come from other baby-led weaning parents who wanted to share ideas for food that worked well for them and their baby. They are favourite meals, tried and tested.

If you've never cooked a meal from scratch before, or if you're just not very confident in the kitchen, the recipes are easy to follow, and there are some helpful tips on basic techniques. If you're already an experienced home cook, this book will provide inspiration for great meals that will work easily with baby-led weaning.

Our aim is to give you the confidence to make a real variety of delicious meals so that you can share good, healthy food with your baby and make family mealtimes the pleasure they should be.

Note: Throughout the book we have tried to be fair to boys and girls by alternating the use of he and she in the chapters. No difference between girls and boys is implied.

Part One

Baby-led Weaning

'I love having my two children sitting next to me with us all eating the same food. I just make healthy meals and Elliot joins in – he'll have a go at anything. There's no stress and he really enjoys it.'

Rikke, mother of Elliot, 11 months, and Ruben, 2 years



Chapter One

BABY-LED WEANING BASICS

Eating with your baby - at the same time, at the same table and sharing the same food - is at the heart of baby-led weaning. There is no need for 'baby food', purées or spoon feeding. Your baby simply feeds herself, exploring and enjoying healthy family meals, from her very first taste of solid food. Baby-led weaning (BLW) makes introducing solids easier and more enjoyable for the whole family and encourages your baby to become confident and happy at mealtimes and to enjoy good, nutritious food as she grows up.

The principle of baby-led weaning is based on the way babies develop and the skills that appear naturally in their first year. If parents give their baby the opportunity to handle food at about the right time, she will instinctively start to feed herself when she is ready. For most babies, this happens at around six months old, which is the same age that the UK Departments of Health and the World Health Organization recommend that babies should start on solid foods. The baby then progresses at her own pace, cutting down her milk feeds when she is ready.

This is very different from the conventional approach, in which the parents make the decision to start their baby on solids, beginning with spoon-fed purées and steering her through set stages towards eventually joining in family meals - something that often doesn't happen until well into toddlerhood.

Of course, babies helping themselves to family food isn't new; it's what babies seem to do naturally. Many parents, especially those who have several children, have spotted

their baby grabbing something from someone else's plate and happily munching away on it. They quickly realise that letting her feed herself as soon as she can makes mealtimes easier and more enjoyable for everyone. And for generations, parents have been encouraged to give their babies finger foods from six months onwards, to help them to develop chewing skills. What is changing now is the assumption that babies need to get used to purées before they can move on to finger foods. This isn't the case. Sucking puréed food from a spoon doesn't prepare babies for chewing; the best way to develop chewing skills is to practise them on food that actually needs chewing – in other words, ordinary, un-mashed food.

'We tried to start Thomas on solids by giving him mush – but he'd just clamp his mouth shut. He was so much happier when he could pick up pieces of food himself. He's always been a fiercely independent little person.'

Elizabeth, mother of Thomas, 13 months

Why Spoon Feeding is Unnecessary

Most people still take it for granted that spoon feeding is the normal way to give babies their first solid foods. But, like much of the current advice on introducing solids, spoon feeding is left over from the days when parents were advised to start solids at three or four months of age – when their babies were too young to feed themselves.

We now know that babies don't need solid foods, and their bodies aren't really ready for them, until they are around six months old. If you've waited until six months to

start solids with your baby, you've skipped the spoon-feeding stage. At this age babies are quite capable of feeding themselves and they don't need to be spoon fed. In fact, many parents find their baby of six months refuses to be fed by someone else; they want to handle food themselves because their instincts drive them to find out about things by testing them out with their hands and mouths.

'I gave Will some couscous for the first time today. It was fascinating watching him work out how to get it to his mouth. He seemed to learn a completely new skill in the space of one meal!'

Karen, mother of Sam, 2 years, and Will, 8 months



What Happens with BLW

The first few months of BLW are not really about eating – they're about exploring food. Your baby will start by handling food, learning what it looks and feels like, then she'll use her mouth to discover its taste and texture. She may not actually eat any at first, but this is quite normal; her milk feeds (whether she is breast- or formula fed) are still providing almost all of her nutrition so she doesn't need anything else yet.



This is what happens typically in BLW:

- The baby is included in family mealtimes, where she watches what others are doing and is offered the chance to join in.
- Nobody 'feeds' the baby; when she is ready she starts handling food and taking it to her mouth herself (at first with her fingers, and later with cutlery).
- To start with, food is offered in pieces that are easy to pick up (babies soon learn how to handle a range of sizes, shapes and textures).

- It's up to the baby how much she eats, and how fast she eats it. It's also up to her how quickly she moves on to a wider range of foods.
- The baby continues to have milk feeds (breast milk or formula) whenever she wants them and she decides when she is ready to begin reducing them.

Key Benefits of BLW

Going *with* your baby's instinct to handle food, rather than *against* it, makes weaning easier and more fun than doing things the conventional way – but there are many other benefits to taking a baby-led approach. It's great for babies because it:

- Allows each baby to move on to solid foods at the right time and pace for her developing body, and ensures that her important milk feeds are not cut out too early
- Allows babies to explore the taste, texture, colour and smell of individual foods
- Helps to develop babies' hand-eye coordination, dexterity and chewing skills
- Allows each baby to eat as much as she needs, in her own time, so establishing good eating habits that may last a lifetime (and which may help to avoid obesity and other food-related problems)
- Makes picky eating and mealtime battles less likely (when there is no pressure on babies to eat, there is far less opportunity for meals to become a battleground)
- Encourages confidence at mealtimes and enjoyment of a wide range of foods
- Means babies can be part of family mealtimes from the beginning

Baby-led weaning is great for parents too because it means more relaxed mealtimes for the whole family. There's no pressure to get your baby to eat and no need for games or tricks to persuade her to eat healthy foods. And you don't need to make or buy purées, so eating in is cheaper and eating out is easier. Plus, of course, eating with those we love is an enormously important way of developing and cementing strong family bonds.

Is BLW Suitable for all Babies?

Some babies have medical or developmental problems that prevent them from picking up food, or from chewing it. Others, who were born prematurely, may need solid foods before they are physically able to feed themselves. If this is the case for your baby, she may need to be spoon fed, at least at first. But, as long as it's safe, it is still a good idea to encourage her to handle food, to help her to develop some of the skills that she finds difficult. If you are in any doubt about your baby's general health or development, seek advice from a doctor or dietitian before you start offering solid foods.

'We decided early on that mealtimes were going to be a social thing, not just about the food. It really took the pressure off eating, and, now he's older, Daniel joins in with our conversations and mealtimes are just great.'

Lisa, mother of Daniel, 2 years



Chapter Two

HOW BABIES LEARN TO FEED THEMSELVES

Babies learn to feed themselves with solid foods naturally, when the time is right, but it can be useful to know when your baby is likely to be ready and how his skills will develop. This chapter explains what to look for and how you can help your baby to progress at his own pace.

The Right Time for Solids

For the first six months of their lives all babies need is breast milk or infant formula, which are full of easily digested nutrients and calories. Their digestive and immune systems aren't yet ready to cope with anything else.

Milk feeds continue to provide almost all of a baby's nutrition until they are about one year old, but from around six months they start to need more nutrients than they can get from milk alone. However, the need is very small at first and grows quite slowly, so there is no reason to rush the introduction of solid foods. Most babies require only very small quantities of solid food until they are between nine months and a year old. They need time to get used to the feel and taste of food, and for their bodies to adjust naturally, before they eat more.

A baby's gradual need for more nutrients develops at the same pace as his skill at getting food to his mouth and his body's ability to cope with it. If he is allowed to feed

himself from the beginning, he'll spend the first few months of family meals learning how to handle food (with his hands and his mouth), while his body gradually adapts to a mixed diet. So by the time he actually needs to eat more – between about nine months and a year – he will be able to feed himself a wide variety of foods and his eating will become more purposeful. It's only then that he'll gradually start to cut down his milk intake.

Is My Baby Ready?

The UK Departments of Health's recommended minimum age for starting solid foods is six months; a few babies may be ready a week or two earlier, and it's not unusual for some babies not to be really interested in eating until they are eight months or older. The problem for parents is that most of the signs of readiness they have traditionally been told to watch out for (such as waking at night) appear considerably earlier than six months. We now know that these are not linked to the need for extra nutrients or to the ability to digest other foods – they're just things that happen naturally. Extra hungriness isn't a sign of readiness either: if a baby needs fuel for growth, then calorie-dense breast milk (or formula) is the answer, not solid foods.

Most babies are only truly ready to start exploring solid foods when they can do all of the following:

- Sit up with little or no support
- Reach out and grab things effectively
- Take objects to their mouth quickly and accurately
- Make gnawing and chewing movements

These signs usually appear together at around six months – rarely much earlier. But the most reliable sign is

when your baby grabs food from your plate and takes it to his mouth and starts to chew it.

'I was peeling an orange one day and Rae was literally trying to climb out of her highchair to grab it from me. I gave her it and she loved it.'

Lucy, mother of Natalie, 3 years, and Rae, 8 months

Moving Towards Solid Food

Just like learning to smile, crawl, walk or talk, learning to eat solid food is a natural part of any healthy baby's development. These key skills always develop in the same order, but at each baby's unique pace. So, although these abilities emerge at a slightly different time for each baby, the skills they need have all been developing gradually, from birth onwards.

A healthy, full-term baby can find his way to his mother's breast and feed as soon as he is born. The mother helps by holding her baby in a supportive position but the rest is done by the baby himself – self-feeding starts from the very beginning. This is a fundamental survival skill that all newborn babies have, even if they're not breastfed. If the baby is allowed to feed whenever he needs to, he will manage his own appetite and take exactly the amount he needs.

By around four months the baby is beginning to develop skills that will later help him to eat solid food. He can reach out and grab hold of interesting things (his toys or someone's keys, for example) and he is starting to bring them to his mouth so that he can explore them with his lips and tongue. Babies' mouths are extremely sensitive and this is how they learn about taste, texture, shape and size.

By around six months, the baby is able to take things to his mouth more accurately. If he picks up something edible, he'll treat it just like a toy – he'll explore it with his hands (which are more coordinated now) and his mouth, but he doesn't know it's food. *He is curious, rather than hungry.* If he manages to get some into his mouth, that, for him, is an interesting bonus, but not the purpose of the exercise.

The ability to chew also begins to develop at around six months. This is an important skill because chewing food (with or without teeth) softens it and mixes it with saliva, which makes it easier and safer to swallow, and it also begins the process of digestion. Having the opportunity to practise chewing as early as possible is the best way to ensure that babies learn to do it effectively. Babies who aren't given the opportunity to chew food until they are quite a bit older than six months (10 months or more) are often fussy eaters later on.



Because eating skills develop in a pre-set order, babies discover how to gum, gnaw, bite and chew food before they learn to move anything to the back of their throat for swallowing. This means that they rarely try to swallow anything that they haven't chewed. So don't be surprised if, for the first week or two of solid foods, much of what your baby appears to be eating doesn't actually get swallowed but instead falls back out of his mouth.

'We offered Dylan some apple and pear for his first solids. We were so impressed with how accurately he managed to coordinate his hands to get the fruit into his mouth - he definitely wouldn't have been able to do that even a few weeks ago. He seemed to really enjoy trying both. Not sure much was actually eaten though!'

Louise, mother of Dylan, 6 months

The Gag Reflex

Many babies gag when they are learning to manage solid food in their mouths. It may be that this is a way of helping them to learn to eat safely, by teaching them not to overfill their mouths or to push food too far back before they've chewed it. Some babies gag only once or twice, while others continue to do it on and off for several weeks.

When a baby gags, food that isn't ready to be swallowed is pushed forward in a retching movement to prevent it getting to the back of the throat. In a baby, the gag reflex is very sensitive, so it is activated more easily than in an adult, with the 'trigger point' much farther forward in the mouth.

Although gagging can be unsettling to watch, most babies don't seem to be bothered by it; they usually bring

the offending piece of food forward fairly quickly, then either spit it out or chew it – and carry on eating quite happily.

To help the gag reflex to work for your baby, make sure that he is sitting upright while he is eating (supported if necessary), so that any food that isn't ready for swallowing falls forward – out of his mouth – rather than sliding backwards towards his throat. It's also important that no-one but your baby puts food into his mouth, so that he can take the time he needs to control each mouthful effectively.



Although they are sometimes confused, choking is not the same as gagging; choking happens when something completely or partially blocks the airway (way past where the gag reflex is triggered). A total blockage is very rare (and requires standard first-aid measures) but babies can usually cough up something that is partially blocking their airway very well by themselves, provided they are sitting

upright or leaning forward. Choking is no more likely with baby-led weaning than with spoon feeding, provided simple, basic safety rules are followed, [See here](#) for more information on safety.

Helping Your Baby to Learn

Babies need lots of opportunities to practise their eating skills and a range of foods to learn on. That way they can manage different textures and gradually increase the amount they eat by themselves. There is no need for the traditional 'stages', where you start with a few teaspoons of smooth purée and progress, eventually, to lumpy foods three times a day.

However, it is possible to pinpoint a few key eating skills that appear as your baby progresses and this can be a useful way to make sure you are giving him all the opportunities he needs to learn and to widen his diet. The grids below identify what to look for and roughly how old your baby will be when these skills start to appear.

It's a good idea to prepare your meals so that they include textures and shapes that your baby hasn't quite mastered yet, alongside food he can manage fairly easily. Since most meals have a variety of shapes and textures, the easiest way to do this is simply to share all the different elements of your meal with your baby. As long as you include food he *can* manage, he will be able to try out the rest without getting frustrated. In fact, he will probably surprise you with what he can do, if you give him the opportunity.

Each skill will appear at the time that is right for your baby, so any attempt to teach him or push him is likely to be frustrating for both of you. He will learn to eat with a fork or a spoon eventually, but most babies find that fingers

are the most efficient method for quite a while. If you concentrate on giving your baby the opportunity to try out different skills, he'll enjoy developing them in his own time.

'Eddie now wants to put a spoon in the bowl and get the food himself. He's always been pretty good at aiming with a spoon, but hasn't quite got the coordination to get it from the bowl yet - but he's on his way.'

Rachel, mother of Robin, 2½ years, and Eddie, 11 months

Developing Skills

Ready to start: From around 6 months

What you'll see

He can take toys to his mouth accurately and quickly. He gnaws on them and makes chewing movements. He is able to sit up straight with little support and will probably want to join you at the table. He may grab a large piece of food from your plate and take it to his mouth.

Easy to manage foods

Large stick-shaped pieces of food, including fruit and vegetables ([see here](#)), crusts, toast, large pasta shapes and soft patties or rissoles shaped or cut into 'fingers'. Long strips of meat.

Foods for him to try

[See here](#).

Reach and grasp, with palmar grip: From around 6-8 months

What you'll see

He can reach out for large pieces of food and grasp them, using his whole hand. But he can't get at the food once it's inside his fist, so he needs it to be long enough to poke out of the top, so he can gum or gnaw it. He may hold the food in one hand and use the other hand to guide it to his mouth. He doesn't yet know his own strength, so he tends to crush soft foods in his hands. In the early weeks most food falls out of his mouth because he hasn't yet learnt to chew and swallow. He drops the food he's holding when he wants to pick up another piece because he can't yet release the food on purpose.

He spends time examining food, passing it from hand to hand and playing with it.

Easy to manage foods

Large stick-shaped pieces of food, including fruit and vegetables ([see here](#)), crusts, toast, large pasta shapes and soft patties or rissoles shaped or cut into 'fingers'. Long strips of meat.

Foods for him to try

Foods for picking up in clumps, such as sticky rice, thick porridge, mashed potatoes, minced meat, grated cheese. Slippery foods, such as pasta shapes with sauce.



Fist opening and closing: From around 7-9 months