

bye-bye, mush

Baby-led weaning takes a new approach to solids.

by Nicole Sweeney Etter



When Allison Reyna's twins were high-chair ready, she let them gnaw on slices of avocado, banana, apple, and mango instead of spoon-feeding the usual purees. As a holistic nutritionist, she liked the idea of baby-led weaning, a method of introducing solids that lets babies self-feed real foods—like cooked broccoli—in place of blended mush.

Championed by Gill Rapley, a former public health nurse in Britain and co-author of *Baby-led Weaning: The Essential Guide to Introducing Solid Foods*, the approach is attracting buzz in natural-parenting circles and beyond.

"I read about baby-led weaning and a lightbulb went off," says Reyna, who recommends the approach to clients of her child consulting company, Cheer Up Buttercups, in Austin, Texas. "As a nutritionist, I felt that baby-led weaning made more sense than the conventional approach I took with my oldest son. Why feed my baby nutrient-deficient rice cereal and purees that were bland and tasteless and did nothing to expand his palate?"

By the time her twins turned 1, they were devouring chicken teriyaki, pad thai, salmon burgers, bean chili, and more—a stark difference from their much pickier older brother. Other perks: Her twins felt included in family meals, and it was easier and more cost-efficient than specially prepared baby food.

"It's so intuitive," says Jennifer Thomas, M.D., a pediatrician and lactation consultant in Franklin, Wisconsin, who specializes in infant feeding. "For some kids it just makes sense that they want some

independence—they don't want to have a spoon at their face, they want to practice new skills."

TO SPOON OR NOT TO SPOON?

The World Health Organization and American Academy of Pediatrics recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, although most pediatricians suggest starting babies on cereals and purees at 4 to 6 months.

Allowing your baby to choose what and how much she wants to eat can help avoid food battles later on, Rapley says. Discovering a food's size, texture, and smell is also a valuable part of learning. "We kind of understand that babies need to explore, but we don't seem to want to let them do it with the most obvious stuff at the most obvious time," she says.

Not all traditional doctors, however, are convinced. Jatinder Bhatia, M.D., chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Nutrition, says there's no research on the best method of starting solids, but he still advises starting infants on purees when age appropriate. He recommends introducing solids no sooner than when a baby is 17 weeks old and no later than when she is 28 weeks old.

READY, SET, EAT

If you're going to try baby-led weaning, most babies are capable of self-feeding around 6 months. Start by offering strips of soft food—think ripe fruits like pears and melons and steamed veggies like carrots and broccoli—and make them long enough that your baby can

SHUTTERSTOCK (2)



table-time tips

Co-author of *Baby-led Weaning*, Gill Rapley offers this advice for setting your baby's table:

FORK BEFORE SPOON

"It's much easier to stab something than it is to use a spoon to scoop," she says. "It's important to have a fork that actually works, not one of those blunt baby forks."

TAKE A DIP

Give tots a chance to practice scooping by offering fruit, veggies, or breadsticks with dip.

UN-SUPERSIZE IT

Sippy cups are useful away from home, but take the top off at the dinner table—just be sure to avoid baby cups that are the same diameter as an adult one, so it's easier for baby.

get a good grip. "It's quite important to start with a variety of foods," Rapley says. "There's no reason to wait on things like meat because babies actually need a variety of nutrients." Slow-cooked ground meat and chicken are good choices. The key is to make sure vegetables, fruits, and meats are soft.

At first, your child might just let the food drop from his mouth—he is just practicing his technique. He'll move the food toward his throat when he's developmentally ready. To prevent choking, feed your baby upright and never leave him unattended during mealtime. Babies are also protected by a strong gag reflex, and letting your little one control his food intake and practice chewing before swallowing helps him learn to eat safely.

So what shouldn't go on your baby's plate? "Anything goes, apart from dangerous things," Rapley says. That includes honey (until a baby is 1 year old), small round fruits like grapes (unless cut up), and whole nuts. If your family has food allergies, you might want to avoid those foods as well.

Don't forget, breast milk or formula is still a major part of babies' diets until they reach a year. Eventually, your baby's solid meals will become more substantial, but for now they're just fun—and tasty—play. ●

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