

# A parent's guide to... weaning

By Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author

At a point when most parents are just about getting on top of feeding their babies with milk, the world of weaning beckons. Blenders, bibs and sticky highchairs are all part of this world, along with some babies who seem quite uninterested. Advice about when to start, what to give and even which method to follow abounds. So what are the key points to get right when weaning?

A good starting point is to understand that weaning is not so much about getting babies off milk, but about introducing new foods. Foods other than milk will provide your child with iron and other nutrients that are vital for continued growth.

So when should weaning begin? The health advice is quite clear. Aim to wean at six months. This is the point at which most babies now need the additional iron that comes from eating a wider diet and importantly, the point at which their digestive system can cope. It is worth noting that this fairly unanimous advice came in 2001 after much medical research, but the word has not always hit the street. This will mean that you will find plenty of people out there who will tell you to start weaning earlier. You may also hear that you should start to wean if your baby has

started to wake up in the night or to seem very hungry. If this is happening, do talk to your health visitor so that you can get up-to-date and informed advice about possible next steps.

So, in the run-up to these six months, what can you do to prepare? My advice is to look out for a highchair that is easily cleaned, a shower curtain or piece of fabric for your floor and some good bibs. Weaning is messy! On a more serious note, learn what to do in a situation when your baby is choking or, as is more common, gagging. A health visitor, nurse or a doctor will quickly be able to show you.

When it comes to actual weaning, the traditional approach is to start off babies with pureed or runny food which is offered on a spoon, and over a few weeks move them on to lumpier foods, then finger foods and then to a point when the child can self-feed using fingers and a spoon. In its favour, it is a tried-and-tested technique that generations of parents have used successfully.

But as with all things 'parenting', a different approach

known as Baby-Led Weaning has appeared recently.

Instead of parents feeding them using spoons, babies are meant to self-feed from the word 'go' with small pieces of hand-held solid food. The idea is to put babies firmly in control of their own eating and also to encourage lumpy foods from early on so that they will be less fussy.

In terms of health professionals, the jury is out. While the idea of a relaxed and positive feeding experience is universally liked, there are concerns that some babies may not take in sufficient quantity of food and thus nutrients. There are also some worries about the risks of choking, and finally, there is a lack of robust research evidence.

The jury is also out when it comes to parents, too. Some parents love Baby-Led Weaning with an almost religious zeal, others find it too messy, and a final group do a bit of spooning alongside self-feeding.

Whatever method you decide to use, there

are some key goals to focus on. First, aim to make sure that your baby associates food and mealtimes with pleasure rather than stress. Second, you need to introduce them to a wide range of tastes, especially fruit and vegetables. And finally, you must introduce your child to lumpy foods that require a little chewing within a few weeks of starting.

If you can score on all three points, the chances are that you will avoid having a fussy eater.



## CASE STUDY

'I began weaning George when he was six months old. Both sets of grandparents thought that I was crazy to wait so long, but I wanted to follow the advice that I was being given, especially as there is a family history of food allergies.

'George was a bit slow starting off and my early attempts ended with him spitting out the baby rice or crying. I started to wonder if I was doing something wrong, but a friend suggested mashing up some banana instead. After some strange looks, he began to enjoy it.

'I quickly came to the conclusion that he is a baby who needs time, and so now that he is on to finger foods, I tend to let him set the pace by putting out a range of different foods and letting him help himself.

Sometimes, he does play with them more than eat them and he is quite messy, but we do get there in the end.

'It can be frustrating to find that food that you have prepared is not liked or wanted, but there is no point in getting stressed about it. I usually find that a week later, he will wolf the same food down!

'Two of my friends have done Baby-Led Weaning. For one of them it worked well, but the other gave up after a couple of weeks. It was too messy for her, and she also found that her son was barely eating.

'I think my approach is between the two. I do spoon-feed him, but I am also ready to let him tackle food by himself. I think that as a parent, you have to do what works for you.'

## WEANING TOP TIPS

- Don't leave your baby alone with food.
- Be patient – it takes time for babies to enjoy new tastes and textures.
- Don't force-feed – if you are worried your baby is not eating enough, contact your health visitor.
- Eat along with your child, as this helps them to relax.
- Expect that some flavours will need to be tried out several times before being accepted.
- Talk to your health visitor if your baby keeps refusing food or is gagging a lot.
- Introduce plain water so your baby has a drink at meal times.
- Reduce milk feeds, but don't stop altogether. Babies will need 500-600ml (a pint) of milk even when eating three meals a day.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)  
[www.eatwell.gov.uk](http://www.eatwell.gov.uk)  
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