

Is what you're doing BLW? And does it matter?

I get lots of questions about whether it's possible to switch from conventional weaning to baby-led weaning, or to do a bit of both. I also hear stories about parents being asked to leave online groups because they aren't 'true' BLWers. So I thought it was about time I explained my thinking on all of this.

What IS BLW?

Parents are often asked "Are you doing BLW or are you spoon feeding?". But the real question should be "Are you taking a baby-led approach to weaning or a conventional one?" This is because baby-led weaning (BLW) isn't a feeding *method*, it's a fundamental approach to babies and food. It's about how you view your baby's capabilities in relation to eating, not just whether or not you feed her with a spoon.

BLW encompasses offering healthy foods, sharing family mealtimes, making sure only your baby puts food into her mouth, and trusting her to know whether to eat, what to eat, how much and how quickly – *as well as* offering her graspable foods from the outset and letting her pick them up with her hands. It's quite possible to decide not to use spoons and purees without fully embracing the trust and respect for your baby that is what BLW is really all about.

Can we 'switch' to BLW?

Yes! I firmly believe that it's never too late to switch to BLW. While a baby who has been started on purees and spoon feeding can't truly be defined as having been fully BLW'd (see *Why definitions matter*, below), that doesn't mean that he and his parents can't be said to be currently following a BLW approach. It's no different from a mother who starts off formula feeding and then switches to breastfeeding – her baby won't have been 'exclusively breastfed' but they are nevertheless a breastfeeding couple *now*. Everyone is entitled to change their approach when they learn something new, or when they discover that what they've chosen isn't working for them.

Can we 'do a bit of both'?

This is a tricky one. I am totally in favour of parents doing whatever works best for them and their child. If this involves a combination of spoon feeding and self-feeding, so be it. What this *isn't*, though, is a combination of BLW and conventional weaning – it's really just conventional weaning, but starting at six months (from when the introduction of finger foods alongside spoon-fed pureed or mashed food has always been recommended). BLW is about more than just offering your baby food to pick up – it's about trusting him to know what he needs. If you're topping him up with a spoon after he's had a go with his hands, then you're not really doing that. The bottom line is that trusting your baby and not quite trusting him are simply not compatible. So, while doing some self-feeding and some spoon feeding may work for you, it's not BLW.

A lot of parents who say they are 'doing a bit of both' are in fact just following conventional weaning, without realising it. The reason is to do with timing: BLW was beginning to be talked about at around the same time (2002) as the minimum recommended age for solid feeding was changing from four months to six months. The result is that many parents don't realise that finger foods were already recommended from six months – alongside purees –

prior to this. They therefore believe that offering their baby *any* finger foods means they are 'doing (some) BLW'.

Why definitions matter

Does the definition of BLW really matter? I believe it does, for two reasons. First, it matters for parents who are hearing about BLW for the first time. If they are to make an informed decision about how they want to approach weaning with their baby they need to understand the underpinning ethos of BLW. If they don't, they may implement only part of it and then be dismayed when it doesn't 'work'. Worse, they may do something dangerous, such as putting lumps of food into their baby's mouth 'for her', which could lead to her choking.

The second reason I believe the definition matters is to enable an increase in knowledge about children and food – globally. If what we think may be the lifelong benefits for babies of being BLW'd (better eating habits, less risk of obesity etc.) are to be proven – or even disproven – by research, then studies need to define clearly and unambiguously what 'true' BLW is. If researchers set out to compare babies who have been BLW'd with babies weaned the conventional way *without* accurately defining what those terms mean, then there is a real risk that some babies will be said to have been BLW'd when, for example, they had purees for the first two weeks, or were routinely spoon-fed at certain meals, or were always fed separately from the rest of the family. This muddying of the waters would make the results of the research meaningless, and could well mean that some of the real benefits of BLW don't show up. (It's the same as researchers' insistence, nowadays, on a clear definition of 'exclusive breastfeeding'; it's only since the importance of this has been appreciated that the real differences between breastfeeding and formula feeding have begun to emerge.)

Belonging to the 'club'

So what does this mean for BLW groups and forums? Should parents who are 'doing a bit of both', or who started off following a conventional approach and then 'switched' to BLW be allowed to be members of the BLW 'club'? My answer is yes, I think they should. While I do believe it's important for everyone to be clear whether what they are doing is or isn't 'true' BLW, I don't believe anyone should feel ostracised for not choosing (or being able) to follow it to the letter. Everyone is different: for some, their support network of family and friends is pro-BLW, while others face resistance every day. Some babies have specific medical or developmental challenges that impact on their eating. For many parents, being able to share others' experiences is what gives them the courage to keep going at the level they are, or to make the leap to 'full' BLW.

People meet at different points along the parenting route but we can still be friends and travel together, sharing what we have in common while at the same time respecting our differences. While it's not helpful to admit people whose intention is to make trouble, I like to think anyone who is genuinely interested in finding out more about BLW would be made to feel welcome in a BLW group.