

How early is too early to start introducing solid foods?

I am often contacted by parents whose baby of 22-24 weeks is showing interest in solid food. They are wary of starting 'too early' and yet feel their baby is giving them a clear lead that s/he is ready. While I am unable to offer specific guidance for individual babies, my general response to this dilemma is as follows.

The 6-months 'rule' is important because it keeps babies safe from premature interference with their eating, so I always refer to it in whatever I say. However, my actual position, based on my research and my clinical experience, is that whatever an individual baby is ready to do is probably what's right for that baby. There is good reason to believe that those developmental abilities that are visible to us (sitting upright etc.) are a reliable indicator of the maturity of that baby's (internal) digestive system – nature very rarely makes mistakes. So, if a full-term, healthy baby can (genuinely) sit upright, grasp food and get it to his mouth UNAIDED, then he's probably ready to do just that. If he's also ready to chew it – and perhaps even swallow it – that's fine, but it is more likely that these skills will follow in due course.

One of the reasons that I make a point of emphasising the six months 'rule', even though I don't consider it to be cast in stone, is that it's all too easy for those who don't understand the concept of BLW to misinterpret any suggestion that starting earlier than this is acceptable. This can be the beginning of a slippery slope into dangerous practices, which I absolutely do not condone. The problem is that it's tempting to see more ability in one's child than is actually there, and to offer just that little bit of help to enable them to achieve a particular goal. Mostly, this doesn't matter, but when it comes to eating, a baby's ability – or *inability* – to manage the necessary sequence of actions is an important safety factor. 'Helping' them over a hurdle they cannot yet manage for themselves (e.g. by providing extra support to sit up or reach out, guiding their arm towards their mouth, or – worse – putting the food into their mouth 'for them') is potentially hazardous.

It's useful to remember that the 'achievement' of eating is the adult's goal, not the child's. The baby doesn't know that's what the point of all this is – she is just finding out how her own body, and the things around her, work. If she doesn't manage to get the food to her mouth, so what? She hasn't 'failed' – and she has no sense of needing help. Her parents' role is to give her the OPPORTUNITY to do whatever she is ready to do, whether that be touching food, picking it up, licking it, biting it, chewing it and/or swallowing it – or none of the above – *not* to enable her to do something she can't yet manage. Six months represents an average age of readiness, in the same way that most babies take their first step around their first birthday. Clearly some will be ready to walk earlier – and some later – than that. We don't try to prevent those who are ready earlier from walking before the 'correct' age. If we are prepared to accept that a good proportion of babies will not be ready to feed themselves with solid foods until they are seven, eight or nine months, then it is perfectly reasonable to allow that there will also be a few who may begin to do this before they reach the 'magic' age of six months. The crucial point, as I see it, is that the move should be spontaneous and autonomous.

In my opinion, arguments about the 'right' age for introducing solid foods are important only if it's the parent, not the baby, who decides when putting food into her/his mouth should begin – as happens, of course, with spoon feeding. Such arguments are redundant if the decision is made by the baby because all babies develop eating skills in a set sequence, in line with their overall maturity. Theoretically, there is no reason why a baby of one or two months old should not be offered the opportunity to sit upright and pick food up from a plate. What stops this being a sensible option is not that this is the 'wrong' age but that the baby simply isn't capable of it. The same would apply at three, four and five months. *It is extremely unlikely that any infant under about five and a half months would, without any 'help', be able to get more than a taste of solid food.* Those that can are the exception, not the rule. Provided this is fully understood, starting solids 'early' does not, in my view, constitute a problem.

A key challenge in all this is that we don't have the right words to describe the introduction of solid foods when the baby is in control. 'Starting solids' with spoon feeding and purees means someone else putting food into the baby's mouth on a day decided by them. But 'starting solids' using BLW simply means providing babies with the opportunity to eat if and when they want to and are able to. It's up to the baby to take it from there.

Gill Rapley, January 2017