

Baby-led weaning or spoon feeding? The difference it makes to your child's eating habits is actually very small

April 1 2019, by Sophia Komninou



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When it comes to avoiding picky eating and meal time tantrums, parents are usually ready to try any method that promises their child will become

a better and less fussy eater. This is in part why methods of giving solid food to infants have received a [lot of attention](#) in the last few years. Some think that the way babies are introduced to solids can change their attitudes to food into childhood or even for life.

The most [common method](#) used to give babies their first solids has long been to offer a puree or mash using a spoon. This helps parents make sure their babies receive adequate energy and nutrients for their development – something many are often anxious over.

More recently, however, [baby-led weaning](#) has gained popularity – and divided parents. This method sees babies selecting finger foods – such as carrot sticks, broccoli trees or other pieces of whole, baby-fist size pieces of [food](#) – and [feeding](#) themselves. While there have been [unsubstantiated claims](#) that this method can improve a baby's [dexterity and confidence](#), research has associated baby-led weaning with their ability to recognise [when they are full](#) and being less fussy with their food. This makes it an appealing choice for some parents.

However, as with most things baby-related, the reality is that many parents don't use just one method of feeding. It changes depending on the time, day or situation they are in. Which is why, for our [recently published study](#), we wanted to compare how different styles of feeding affects a baby's eating habits and attitudes to food.

Is baby-led weaning better?

We looked at four different categories of toddlers, whose parents introduced them to solids using either: solely baby-led weaning, mostly baby-led weaning with occasional spoon feeding, mostly spoon feeding with occasional finger foods, or just spoon feeding. We asked the parents questions about their feeding strategies and eating behaviours of their toddlers, like fussiness and food enjoyment.

Usually, in a [statistical analysis](#), we look at whether there is a difference between groups. But what this doesn't tell us is how big the difference actually is. To solve this problem, we looked at the size of the difference between the groups (what we call the effect size). It helps us understand whether the difference actually matters.

We found that the magnitude of difference in a toddler's fussiness and food enjoyment is minimal across the four groups. This means that baby-led weaning, spoon-feeding or anything in between might not actually be the solution to future mealtime battlegrounds some parents hope it will be. That may seem to be in contrast with what the research shows so far, but it doesn't negate those findings. Babies will be less picky about their food if they are fed using baby-led weaning as opposed to any of the other types of feeding, it's just not by that much.

Socio-economics at play

When looking at the strategies parents use to feed their children, our study did show that those who follow baby-led weaning are less likely to use food as a reward or encouragement, and have less control on eating overall. This helps their toddlers learn to make eating decisions for themselves based on whether they are hungry or full. These parents are also more likely to breastfeed for longer, introduce solids after six months and eat more frequently with their toddlers.

However, the key difference here is not that the children were fed using baby-led weaning but instead the type of families who usually follow it. Our findings show that these parents are usually of a higher socio-[economic status](#) and more educated, which makes them more likely to follow a distinctly different parenting style and be able to afford to spend more time and money doing so.

Overall, our results suggest that the way a baby is introduced to solids

will make very little difference to how fussy they will become, or how much they will enjoy food. It is important to remember that how children eat depend on a lot of factors, including [their genetic background](#), their past experiences with food and their [interaction with their parents](#).

Research findings are important when communicating complementary feeding advice to new parents, but headlines and quoted study results can often be misleading. So remember that when reports of research say there is a difference between one method over an other, it's not the whole story. The size of this difference – something that is not often communicated – matters too. The most important thing that [parents](#) can do is to try their best and introduce solids in a way that is more appropriate for their family, rather than stressing about a specific method, as research suggests might make a only a very small difference.

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