



**When Charles Clarke, dad to 7-month-old C.J., saw another babe**

at his son's play group munching on a slice of squash, he was impressed. "We'd started giving C.J. puréed solids at 4 months, but purées became very time-consuming to make," says the Atlanta dad. After asking about the method, known as baby-led weaning, Clarke was curious. "I'd always wondered if C.J. could just eat whatever we were eating but thought it sounded far-fetched to just give it to him and watch him figure it out on his own." Clarke's not alone in his thinking. **A 6-month-old needs help to start solids;**

**you can't just set food in front of him and let him feed himself. OR CAN YOU?**

Gill Rapley and moms the world over think you can. Co-author of *Baby-Led Weaning*, Rapley heard from parents who worried their babies weren't eating enough. "He'll try to grab my apple," she often heard, "but won't eat applesauce." Her novel idea: Skip purées altogether. Go straight to finger foods. Researchers agree: Studies show that babies who feed themselves are less likely to be picky and overweight later on. And now that the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents to wait until 6 months old before starting solids, baby-led weaning may find even more fans. **Here's how to know if she's ready and how to get started:**

## ready, set, nom!

This may seem like a lot for your toothless baby to swallow. Introducing solids can be a big decision for parents. But luckily, baby-led weaning takes it out of your hands. Readiness is in your baby's hands — literally. "The timing is totally subjective," says Rapley. "Providing the opportunity and availability is all you have to do." Since you won't be spoon-feeding her — or even helping her pick food up — all you need to do is put food in front of her. When she's ready to eat, she will.

### CHOWTIME CHECKLIST

- **can she sit upright without support?** Tipping over with food in her mouth is dangerous, so it's best to wait until she can sit solidly on her own.
- **can she reach for and pick up objects?** She needs to be able to get food to her mouth without help. Pincer-grasp skills are not necessary, though — a whole-fist grab is fine.
- **can she bring objects to her mouth?** If she has not mastered the coordination needed to get her hand to her mouth, she won't be able to feed herself.
- **does she chew on toys?** That indicates her jaw muscles are ready to gum food. Teeth aren't needed; she'll use her gums to chew at first.

What about food allergies? The latest from experts is on p. 14.



## nosh pit

While it's not a hard and fast rule, it's a good idea to start soft. Bananas and avocados let him practice chewing before he gums down on something more solid. Once he has the hang of it, anything goes. Just avoid round, smooth or hard choking hazards like whole grapes, popcorn and nuts. Steam vegetables like broccoli and celery at first, but don't overcook — just soften them a little and let baby go at it. Even better: Roasting caramelizes the outsides of foods, making them stickier and easier to hold.

Rapley suggests you think long rather than small when preparing baby's food. A slice that's about 3 inches long lets him hold one end while munching the other. It's fine

to offer very small pieces of food too (think peas, raisins or sliced grapes), but he won't be able to pick them up until he develops a pincer grasp, usually starting at about 8 months.

### PRE-MEAL PREP

- **be seated** Make sure he's sitting upright and well-supported in a highchair or booster seat or on the floor. Crawling while eating can increase the risk of choking.

- **order up** Place one or two slices of food in front of him at a time.

- **watch his mouth** Let him play! Stay close by and watch for signs of choking.



## gagging = good

If you have a sensitive stomach, don't freak out. Your baby's first few meals may be punctuated by loud retching sounds, but she's not tossing her cookies. Gagging is a good thing! It's not the same as choking, since it happens when an unchewed piece of food reaches the back of your baby's tongue. The reflex is triggered before food reaches her airway, so it helps prevent choking by pushing the food forward for more chewing.

How to tell the difference between gagging and choking? Gagging is loud. Choking is silent. As long as your baby is making noise, she's doing it right. Don't put your finger in her mouth; that could push the food farther back. Let her work it out herself, and watch to make sure she doesn't start to choke.

### BEST PLATE FORWARD

- **the spice of life** Different foods develop your baby's palate by highlighting different flavors, herbs and seasonings. It can take multiple exposures before a baby will accept a new food, so keep offering.
- **presentation is everything** You don't want a big plate of brown, and neither does your baby. Varied colors and textures increase the enjoyment of food.

- **choose healthy food** Set an example. "Children watch what adults eat," explains registered dietitian Natalia Stassenko. "When parents eat something, children believe they should eat it too."

