

## **The Eager Eater**

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My first son had rice cereal spooned into his mouth at five months. When my second son was born nearly four years later I was better read; better informed, and a great deal more confident. My intention was to wait until he showed a keen interest in food, and not to worry if this turned out to be a good deal later than the six month point recommended for solids in New Zealand.

However, my son had other ideas.

Aidan was just shy of five months when he grabbed his first piece of food off my plate – a piece of cooked carrot. I took it off him, but not before he sucked the end off it. I know he ate it because even a tiny piece of carrot shows up pretty obviously in the nappy of an exclusively breastfed baby.

At first I did try to keep him away from food. I tried to breastfeed him before we all sat down. But if he knew a meal was about to be served up, he didn't want to breastfeed, he wanted to sit at the table. If I had him on my knee he tried to grab food. If he wasn't on my knee he wailed piteously.

I sought advice. I used an (American based) internet message board with a good reputation (not an LLL one). I was told that I must not, under any circumstances, allow him to eat food before six months. I would wreck his digestive system. I was reluctant to leave him to cry however. He hadn't been left to cry before now, why start? What should I do to combat the crying? He feels left out, they said. Give him his own utensils in a high chair without any food. No, he still cried – he wanted what everyone else had. Try making him popsicles out of breast milk, they said.

This made me pause and take stock. Did I really want to make my baby breast milk popsicles just so that I could stall him a few weeks? What was really going on here?

My son had always been demand fed. I had followed his cues for feeding and sleeping all the way along, and he had always been a good breastfeeder and a good sleeper. He was happy and healthy. I knew he wasn't hungry – I had milk coming out my ears (if anything I had oversupply problems, not a lack of milk). I now felt, after telling me to respond to his cues up until now, the breastfeeding experts were telling me to ignore his cues; for he was telling me loud and clear that he wanted to eat table food. Or at least that he wanted to try.

What do other mammals do, I thought. Ewes don't try to stop lambs eating grass. When they're ready, they just do it. Surely nature doesn't goof to this extent, I figured. I was willing to trust thousands of years of evolution, and suppose that nature would not allow his coordination to develop in advance of his gut. Why should I stop him? He wasn't *hungry*, he had all the breast milk he wanted. He was telling me he wanted something else. So I stopped trying to stop him. By this time he was five months. He went on sitting on my knee at the table, and exploring the food on my plate. At first his coordination was not good, and more food got mushed up in his hands than ended up in his mouth. I know that some of it ended up in his mouth, because I saw it come out the other end. Some food he just took out again, if he couldn't chew it. So at first he was exploring, rather than eating very much.

Aidan was never spoon-fed. He ate only what he could manage by himself. For this reason he started very slowly – no more than a taste, because that was all his coordination would allow. He never had any specially prepared baby-food, only what he grabbed from other people in the house. Fortunately we eat pretty healthy food, mostly. I did keep him away from things like his brother's biscuits at first. We did keep him away from really dumb things like nuts. Interestingly, we never had a single choking incident. If something was too big to swallow, he simply removed it from his mouth. He didn't gag much, I think partly because food was never, for him, something to be slurped. It was chunky from the start, and he was the one in control of it.

We had no history of allergies on either side of the family, so I didn't bother to be careful about in what order Aidan introduced himself to foods. I trusted that my breast milk was good preparation for the diet I eat. I never pureed anything, or put anything on a spoon. He ate what he could pick up on his own. By six or seven months he was eating like a pro, and eating pretty much anything the family did.

I did worry sometimes that all this food meant that he was missing out on breast milk. He was certainly breastfeeding less than he had been. I comforted myself by adding up the number of feeds – he was still feeding seven or eight times every twenty-four hours, sometimes more, partly because he was still feeding regularly at night (thank goodness for night-nursing!). So I was comforted by reminding myself that this is more feeds of breast milk in twenty-four hours than some exclusively breastfed babies get at this age. And I trusted my baby.

It was not trouble free. At about seven months we got some constipation. I think this was partly because of the amount of solids he was now eating (his coordination had become very good by now). I tried to decrease the amount of solids and increase breast milk consumption, but he just yelled at me. We cut out bananas and cheese (both favourites), and that helped a bit. Then I realised I had been limiting water intake at mealtimes so that he did not replace breast milk with water. I gave up, and let him have as much water as he wanted from a cup while he ate. The constipation disappeared immediately. Once again, I just needed to listen to what he wanted.

At twelve months, much to my surprise, his intake of solids decreased, and he went back to breastfeeding more often. I was happy for him to do this, and pleased that such an eager foray into solids had not resulted in early weaning. Now, at two, he is more picky about which foods he will eat, but still enjoys my milk.

I am aware that my son's approach to solids does not fit with official recommendations for introducing solids: he had solids too early; foods were introduced in the "wrong order"; he didn't always have breast milk before solids, he had dairy products too early, gluten too early, wheat too early, meat too early, egg too early, and doubtless violated recommendations on many other counts. The main concessions that I made were that he did not have any processed meat until after one year, and he didn't have cow's milk as a drink until about 16 months.

Aidan's introduction to solid foods was, however, always baby-led. It was also hassle-free: I never had to prepare anything special and I was never caught without something for the baby to eat. I was grateful to my local LLL Group, where no-one said "Oh no! You can't let him eat before six months!" And also, so grateful for LLL's flexible recommendation of "around the middle of the first year" as the time to introduce solids. I have since noted that this relaxed, baby-led approach to solids is supported in *Dr. Jack Newman's Guide to Breastfeeding*, by Dr. Jack Newman and Teresa Pitman, and that allowing a baby to feed him or herself from the start is officially called "baby-led weaning" and more people are now doing it. You can google "baby-led weaning" for information.

If I ever have another baby, I would be happy to allow the new baby to introduce him or herself to solids in the same way as Aidan did. Of course, I would also be happy if this happened some time after six months.

#### **Reference**

- Newman, Dr. Jack, Pitman, Teresa. *Dr. Jack Newman's Guide to Breastfeeding* (revised edition), Harper Collins, Toronto, 2000, 2003, pp 283-6.