

LET'S GET WEANING

OK, SO YOU'RE NOT EXACTLY A DOMESTIC GODDESS, BUT HAVING A BABY IS THE PERFECT EXCUSE TO POP ON A PINNY AND UP YOUR COOKING SKILLS SAYS **PIP JONES**



Clockwise from top: Sweet potato purée, Carrot purée, and Roasted parsnip and pumpkin purée as featured in *Cooking for Your Baby and Toddler* by Louise Fulton Keats

Time sure flies when you're a mum. One minute you're giving your newborn their first meal via a bosom approximately twice the size of their head, the next it seems you're frantically paying for a *Which* subscription because you realise you know *nothing* about blenders (are they the same as food processors?) or what to put in them.

Yes, weaning comes around quickly alright – and although it's a very exciting time, for the mum who has never considered herself much of a whizz in the kitchen, it can be a little daunting, too.

There are easier alternatives to donning a pinny a la Mrs Beaton, what with the rainbow coloured jars and tempting pouches lining all those well-trodden baby aisles in the supermarket and, of course, they have their place in our busy lives. But even as you reach for a ready-made serving of Blitzed Broccoli, you'll probably have a little voice in the back of your head (perhaps your nan's) telling you: 'nothing beats home-cooked, dear...'

And that inner voice is right, for all manner of reasons. The nutritional benefit is the obvious factor, and it's something we've never known more about. Freshly-cooked (or cooked and frozen) food, which hasn't been through a near-nuclear pasteurisation treatment and hasn't been in a jar for perhaps months, is packed with the fuel your baby needs, not only for strong physical growth, but also for optimum cognitive development – a recent study from Bristol University showed that diet within the first three years of a child's life is absolutely paramount and can have a significant impact on IQ.

A HANDS-ON APPROACH

There's also the flavour factor, of course, which is hugely relevant when you consider the weaning stage is your ultimate chance to encourage your baby to fall in love with a variety of fresh tastes. And what about the sensory aspects of home cooking? What might your baby miss out on if they're not exposed to the sights, sounds and smells in your kitchen? It might be messy, but there's a lot to be said for giving your baby

the opportunity to squeeze a big piece of avocado through his fingers and smear it all over his face.

Louise Fulton Keats, author of *Cooking for Your Baby and Toddler* (Hardie Grant Books) and mum to two-year-old Harry, believes the benefits of cooking at home are boundless and, right from the word go, your baby will be absorbing information which will help him develop a healthy relationship with food that could last a lifetime: 'Children have incredible sponge-like brains. Even six-month-old babies will be learning all about the world of food just from watching you shop, cook and eat.'

SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE

'If they see you cut up fresh fruit for breakfast each morning, they're learning that this is the way to start the day. If they see you cook dinner in the evening, they're learning a home-cooked meal each night is the norm.'

If cooking isn't really your forte (yet!), the good news is there's nothing too challenging about making your baby's first meals, which might be just sweet potato, or peas and parsnips put in a

blender with some baby milk or through a mouli – and there's plenty of information out there, in recipe books and online, to help you with ideas for starting out and then for combining flavours.

'Purées couldn't be simpler to prepare,' says Louise, 'so they can help a nervous cook master some key kitchen basics – chopping, steaming, boiling, oven roasting and blending. Once you've gained confidence with all this, it's an easy transition to a soup or casserole.' Well, that's good to know, as the speed at which some babies progress from baby rice and a squashed banana to puréed or mashed lamb hotpot can be surprising to say the least. And that, as much as anything, is a perfect reason to check your own eating habits are angelic, as you can save yourself a whole lot of time and energy by just sharing your meals with your baby.

BEING ADVENTUROUS

There are important rules that must be adhered to, of course. Salt must always be avoided, as should refined sugar. Eggs and meats should be well cooked, and you need to squish or blend whatever you've made to a manageable consistency, or ensure your baby has safe finger food, rather than a choking hazard in his hand. But beyond that, by the time your baby is six months old,

CAROLINE, MUM TO AVA
 'I set up a "baby food factory" in my kitchen once a fortnight. I cook ingredients for eight different meals, combine them accordingly, purée, put into pots and freeze all in one go. It takes two hours, but then I have 30 or so meals ready-made.'



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he can pretty much eat what you eat. And who's to say he won't like a mild curry made with turmeric, garam masala and coconut milk? Just because he comes up to your knee and has no teeth, doesn't mean he won't be delighted and stimulated by exploring a whole world of different flavours.

'Children are far more likely to be accepting of your family meals and have a sophisticated palate if you involve them, rather than feeding them pre-cooked food for their first few months,' Louise says. 'I made it my mission to expose my son to as many different foods as I could so nothing would be unknown and "weird" to him when he hit the neophobic (fear of new things) stage, which happens to many children at the age of two or three.'

The toddler years might seem a long way off if you're just approaching purées, but at any point during this gastronomic journey things might feel like they're going awry (and as someone whose baby went orange at seven months because she'd only eat carrots for six whole weeks, I should know).

Keeping a level head is key. While there's definitely something ingrained in our psyches as mothers, which can make us somewhat obsessive when it comes to feeding our children, allowing yourself to become upset when your baby refuses certain foods or insisting he finishes what's in his bowl are likely to have negative consequences. On the flip side, according to Louise, a baby who associates mealtimes with pleasure is far less likely to develop eating hang-ups down the track.

CREATING GOOD HABITS

'As tempting as it is to beg and plead your child to finish everything, this can create a "plate clearing" mentality which can lead to weight problems later. It can also very quickly lead the two of you into years of food battles and tension at the dining table.'

So, starting as you mean to go on is important. Involve your baby as much as you can right from the start, let him handle his food and, to a degree, choose it. Would he like apple purée or rice pudding today? Make meal times fun, interesting and sociable – lots of studies have shown that sitting down and eating together as a family can have long-lasting benefits. 'The golden rules,' Louise concludes, 'are to stay calm, keep serving healthy foods, eat them yourself, don't be coercive (really, saying he can have a pudding if he eats his broccoli only makes the pudding a hero!) and don't give up.'

ZOE, MUM TO LOUIS

'My two-year-old eats everything at nursery but is very fussy at home. He's strong and healthy, so I remove his plate and tell myself not to sweat the small stuff! I don't want our dinner table to become a battleground.'

LUCY, MUM TO STANLEY

'Getting the consistency of purées right is a case of trial and error, but the rule one quarter protein, one quarter starch and one half veg – the advice for our own plates – often works well. Then top up with formula, breast milk or the cooking water from green veg if necessary.'

More of Louise's recipes, from left: First chicken purée, beef and three veg purée, fish, potato and broccoli purée



Weaning essentials

GOOD CHOICE

The Beaba Babycook – steam, purée, defrost and warm your baby's food with one handy contraption. £89.99, mothercare.com



GOOD VALUE

These ceramic mini square baking dishes are great for making individual portions of toddler favourites, such as lasagne and fish pie. £3.45, titchykitch.co.uk



GOOD IDEA

Weaning kit with a bowl and two spoons that change colour if the food is too hot. £6.50, brothermax.com



GOOD THINKING

As soon as they can stand, get them in the kitchen to try cooking in their very own apron. £18.50, booboobelle.com



GOOD SENSE

The Beaba silicone freezing tray for is an essential for storing purée portions in the freezer. £8.40, mothercare.com

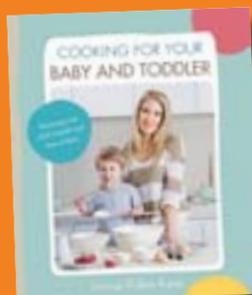


GOOD FOOD

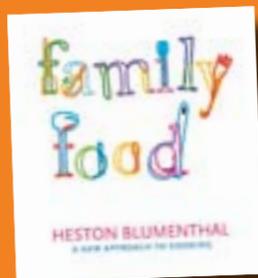
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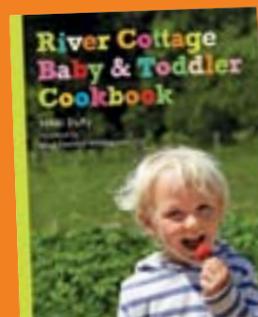
Our pick of inspiring cook books to enliven mealtimes for both you and your baby



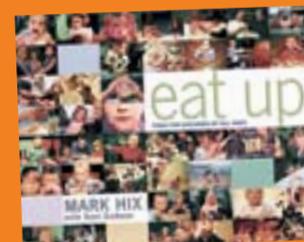
Quick, easy and yummy recipes, as featured on these pages. £18.99, Hardie Grant Books



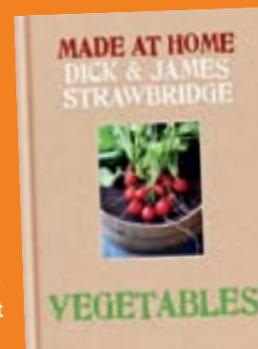
An old favourite from Heston, encouraging innovative family mealtimes. £20, Penguin



Simple and wholesome recipes for both children and adults. £14.99, Bloomsbury Publishing



Packed with ideas designed to introduce children to different flavours. £12.99, Fourth Estate



All you need to know to grow, harvest and cook your own veg. £12.99, Mitchell Beazley