

GILL RAPLEY
& TRACEY MURKETT

Baby-led Parenting

The easy way to nurture,
understand and connect
with your baby



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About the book

Discover the key to responsive, intuitive and relaxed parenting

Learn how to use your baby's natural instincts and abilities to give him the very best start in life. This practical and sensitive guide shows you how following your baby's lead will help you develop a strong and loving relationship from birth.

Find out how to:

- Understand your baby's true needs
- Recognise what your baby is trying to tell you
- Manage sleep, feeding and crying, gently and without stress
- Support your baby's natural desire to learn

Baby-led Parenting will help you and your baby make the most of the critical period from birth to crawling, creating the perfect foundation for a calm and happy childhood.

About the authors

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Gill and Tracey are the authors of *Baby-led Breastfeeding: How to make breastfeeding work with your baby's help*, *Baby-led Weaning: Helping your baby to love good food* and *The Baby-led Weaning Cookbook*.

Baby-led Parenting

The easy way to nurture,
understand and connect
with your baby

GILL RAPLEY &
TRACEY MURKETT

Vermilion
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Introduction

When your baby is born, right up until she first begins to crawl, shuffle or toddle away from you to explore, you are the centre of her world. This part of babyhood is sometimes referred to as the 'in arms' phase. It's a period of intense closeness, when her physical and emotional need for you is at its greatest. This is when you get to know her, when you learn how to care for her, discover how to comfort her and how to make her laugh. It's also a period of extraordinary growth, learning and development. The relationships your baby makes during this period are likely to be the most important of her life.

When you are about to start out as a parent, all of this can appear as daunting as it is exciting. Will we know instinctively how bring up our baby? What are the secrets that will help us get it right? How will we avoid the pitfalls that seem to be so common? The sheer volume of information available, and the number of apparently different 'methods' there are to choose from, can seem overwhelming. But you don't need to look very far – you already have your parenting expert on hand, 24/7: *your baby*.

It's often said that babies don't come with an instruction manual – that's because they *are* the manual. Each baby is unique, and each arrives with her own individual temperament and potential. If you give your baby the opportunity, she will show you what she needs and guide you as to the best way to provide it. She can let you know how she likes to be handled, where she prefers to sleep and

when she wants to eat. She'll tell you when she's frustrated or scared and show how you can make her feel better. Allowing yourself to be led by your baby is the secret to making her feel safe, loved and confident, and letting her development unfold naturally.

This book will show you how to avoid many of the stumbling blocks that parents commonly encounter, and discover a way of parenting that is intuitive, relaxed and rewarding. It will help you to see life through your baby's eyes and, by learning to understand and communicate with her, to be the best parent you can be for *her*.

Baby-led parenting isn't new. It's a type of parenting that families all over the world have followed for generations, simply because they have found that responding to their baby in a way that keeps her happy makes life more enjoyable for everyone. Yet still today parents are sometimes encouraged – by their families, by health professionals and by the media – to take an approach that is *parent*-led rather than baby-led: one that seeks to control their child's life, even to the extent of deciding how long she should sleep for or how frequently she ought to be cuddled. There is a sense that a baby who doesn't fit easily into a pre-determined pattern is somehow flawed, or that her parents must be doing something wrong, and that this constitutes a problem that can – and should – be fixed. The result is that many parents end up fighting their baby's natural instincts and abilities, preventing her from doing things she is capable of, while at the same time pushing her to do things she can't.

Many of the common assumptions that exist about how babies *should* behave bear little resemblance to how they *do* behave. They are not based on the way real babies develop but on a range of unrealistic expectations, which – even if they were accurate – couldn't possibly apply to every baby. Trying to persuade a baby to comply with them can be a frustrating, uphill battle. Your baby is the only

person who really knows if she is hungry, bored or tired. She is the only one to know if the moment is right for her to roll over for the first time, fall asleep by herself, or have her first taste of solid food. So this book won't tell you how long to spend feeding, cuddling or playing with her, when she should be eating three meals a day or when you can expect her to sleep through the night. Instead, *Baby-led Parenting* will help you to recognise your baby's natural rhythms and her changing needs, and to know that you can rely on her as your guide.

Baby-led parenting isn't about allowing your baby to rule your life or always letting her have her own way. It's simply about nurturing, facilitating and supporting her. It means discovering a way of caring for her that fits around her needs and her stage of development, while also working for you, too. It's about understanding the importance of giving her the opportunity to follow her instincts and practise new skills, recognising her readiness for fresh experiences, and knowing how to support rather than interfere as she learns about the world. For many parents, it's the key to more relaxed and rewarding parenting.

The ethos of baby-led parenting is the central theme running through our previous books, *Baby-led Weaning* and *Baby-led Breastfeeding*. This book shows how being baby-led works for pretty much all aspects of parenting, making life easier and more relaxed for everyone. It's the book we both wish we'd had when our children were tiny. It would have taken away some of the confusion of the early days and given us confidence that allowing ourselves to be led by them – which we each learned to do, eventually and to varying degrees – wasn't just lazy (or even slightly irresponsible), but sensible and valuable.

Baby-led Parenting is intended for all parents, whether you plan to combine having children with work or you see yourself as a stay-at-home carer, and whether your baby is breastfed or bottle fed. Most of the text is written for both

parents but there are certain sections that are directed more towards the mother, simply because it is she who is most immediately involved in pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding.

Although the focus of the book is the remarkable period when your child is a babe in arms, the principles of baby-led parenting extend far beyond this. Adopting this way of parenting from the start will help you to build a loving relationship with your child, based on a willingness to see things from her perspective and to trust her judgement and capabilities. Of course, you may not be able to follow your baby's lead *all* of the time but we hope our suggestions will help you to stay in touch with her needs whatever the circumstances. By doing this you will create a strong foundation that will enable you to navigate the toddler years, and to continue to nurture and support her throughout her childhood.

Note

Throughout the book, when referring to the baby, we have alternated between *he* and *she*, chapter by chapter, to be fair to both.

1

Baby-led parenting - what it is and why it matters

Baby-led parenting centres around each individual child's needs, personality and abilities. It's about allowing your baby to guide you from the moment he is born, recognising that he is the best person to help you nurture him in a way that is right for *him*, and to adapt as he develops and grows. All of this will help to smooth his transition to the wider world, so that it happens gradually, at his own unique pace.

This chapter explains the basis of the baby-led approach, what makes it so different from some of the alternative ways of bringing up children, and why the extraordinary time when their child is a babe in arms is so important for babies and their parents.

What is baby-led parenting?

Babies' behaviour has evolved over thousands of years to give them the best chance of surviving. Acknowledging babies' innate abilities, their instinctive behaviours, the gradual course of their development, and their natural drive to master new skills is at the heart of baby-led parenting. It's about trusting your baby to know what he needs. It means being in tune with him, listening to what

he is telling you, noticing what he is able to do and seeing things from his point of view. It's about empathy, intuition and responsiveness.

The baby-led approach revolves around the need to support babies' **autonomy** and to recognise and respect their **developmental readiness**. Autonomy means babies having an element of control over their lives and being able to decide some things for themselves; developmental readiness acknowledges that each baby develops skills and abilities, and gains emotional maturity, at his own unique pace. Allowing your baby to explore his world, to try out new skills when he is ready, to follow what his body is telling him – for example, by sleeping when he's tired and eating when he's hungry – and to stay close to you for as long as he needs, represents respect for his autonomy *and* his level of development.

Baby-led parenting allows your baby to play an active part in his relationships with you and others. Instead of him simply having to accept what is decided for him and what is done to him, his needs and preferences are taken into consideration. The result is that he is able to shape some of the events that involve him. Being baby-led is an ongoing partnership between you and your baby, in which he shows you what he needs and you work out how best to provide it. It doesn't mean allowing him to control your life – it just means allowing him to have as much control as is possible and reasonable over his *own* life.

'Letting my babies lead the way was great. You have to let them choose – you can't just force them to like things they don't. They're people, too! Each one is different and you have to work round that if you want them to be calm and happy.'

Tina, mother of Ava, 9, and Damon and Jason, 2 years

All babies reach developmental milestones and acquire new skills in more or less the same order, but in their own time. They smile, walk and talk when they are ready – there is

nothing we can do to hurry them. As long as they are given the opportunity to try out and practise new skills, they'll develop them naturally as they mature. Sometimes parents are told that their baby should have achieved certain things by a particular age, such as sleeping through the night or no longer breastfeeding, but these things don't form part of the normal babyhood sequence of development. Much of this thinking is based on cultural norms, rather than on babies' natural behaviours or up-to-date research. Setting unrealistic goals like these can put enormous pressure on parents to get their baby to comply with others' expectations, and make family life unnecessarily stressful. Baby-led parenting allows you to forget about what your baby *should* do and concentrate instead on what he *can* do, and what works for him and you at any particular time.

What does baby-led parenting mean in practice?

At its simplest, baby-led parenting is about aiming to keep your baby happy, by:

- being open to what he is telling you, and watching and listening for his cues, so that you can work out what he needs and how best to respond to him
- giving him the opportunity to do things that match his stage of development, and adapting as his needs change – for example, keeping him close to you until he lets you know that he is ready to manage on his own
- following his rhythms – learning to recognise his natural cycles and unique patterns, adjusting your routines (as much as possible) to take these things into account, and trusting that he will adapt to *your* rhythms, gradually, as he matures
- empathising with him, seeing things through his eyes, trying to imagine his feelings and finding ways to make

- even everyday events, such as nappy changing and being dressed, as pleasant and stress-free as possible
- acknowledging that his needs and preferences may change from day to day and week to week, and being ready to accommodate them

In other words, it means watching and listening to what your baby is telling you, to help you to understand his needs and respond to them intuitively.

‘I try to give Alfie as much love and attention as possible but there’s always such a lot of other stuff going on. Trying to make sure the balance is tipped in his favour definitely feels right to me.’

Rebecca, mother of Alfie, 1 year

Understanding your baby’s needs

Being baby-led is likely to be easier if you can imagine how your baby sees things and try to understand how various different situations might feel to him. This will help you respond to him in a way that meets his needs without feeling frustrated at his demands. The starting point is recognising that most of what *you* know you have found out through experience. For your baby, everything is new and he can find out only gradually, through his own experiences, what is safe – and what (or who) he can rely on.

Your baby needs to be close to you

Babies are born with no memories of past events to draw on. All they have to guide them are their instincts. In this sense, they are no different from babies born 30 years ago – or 30,000. All babies, however rich or poor their parents, and however advanced the technology around them, have the same instincts, needs and urges. These drives exist to

help us survive as human beings, and they relate to the environment in which we evolved. The most fundamental of these needs, and the one that can be most difficult to match with 21st-century assumptions about babies, is the need to be close to a familiar person.

At birth, a human baby can do far less for himself than the young of most other mammals because, compared with them, he is born far more immature. This is thought to be an evolutionary adaptation: early humans began to develop bigger brains at around the same time as they began to walk upright, which meant that the mother's pelvis became too narrow for a fully mature baby's head to fit through. So humans evolved to give birth at an earlier stage, when the baby's head is smaller. But this immaturity means that newborn human babies are extremely vulnerable. A young baby cannot get himself out of harm's way or regulate his temperature, and he can't find his own food. For most of history human beings lived in an environment in which a baby left alone for even a short time was at risk of being eaten by a predator or dying of excess heat or cold – or simply (because breastmilk is digested very quickly) of going hungry. All of this means that, as humans, we evolved to carry our young with us, rather than leaving them for long periods in a den or a nest.

In traditional societies the person carrying the baby is most likely to be his mother. It's the baby's mother who is his first place of safety – she provides him with warmth, protection and nourishment, right from the moment of birth, and he is already familiar with her voice, her smell and her heartbeat from his time in the womb. This is why newborns instinctively want to stay close to their mother. And, because babies' limited experience of the world means they have no sense of space or time, their instinct also tells them that they need to be within touching (or at least sniffing) distance of her, night and day, if they are to feel truly safe.

Of course, in the 21st century, post-industrialised world the risks to a newborn baby aren't quite the same, but our babies don't know this. Without his mother close, the newborn is likely to feel frightened. Unlike an ape baby, who can cling to his mother's fur, or a baby deer, who can follow her if she moves away, a human baby has to rely on his mother to keep him with her – so he'll do everything he can to get her attention and make her want to protect him. Your baby can't come and find you if you are apart from him. If he can't see you or smell you, he doesn't know that you are nearby and that you will return – and he doesn't know that he will be safe until you do. He will learn these things over time but, for now, all he can do is try to call you back. If your response isn't fairly swift, or if you offer no soothing words or touch while he waits for you to pick him up, he won't know he's been heard and he is likely to become distressed.

Babies (don't just) need their mother

A mother and her newborn baby are sometimes referred to as a 'dyad' – two units so closely linked and interdependent that they are regarded as one. Indeed, as far as the baby is concerned they *are* one (he won't even begin to understand that he is a separate person until he is at least three months old). This new pairing is fragile; it needs to be protected and supported – which is where the father (or other supporter) comes in. His primary role is to safeguard this fledgling relationship, nourishing it and allowing it to grow. His own relationship with the baby is important, but in the beginning it's the baby's connection with his mother that takes centre stage.

Seeing things from your baby's perspective, and understanding how your presence reassures and comforts him, will help you to respond to him in a way that is baby-led. Trusting him to know what he needs – even if you can't

always work out why he needs it – is the key to allowing him to guide you.

‘I didn’t really understand how good it is for babies to be close all the time when Asha was tiny. I wish I had. I carried Sammi everywhere in a sling from day one. I loved having him close to me and being able to smell him. There’s nothing like the smell of a newborn baby’s skin! He’s very calm and secure in himself now – I’m sure that early closeness had something to do with it.’

Jenni, mother of Asha-Mei, 3 years, and Sammi-Li, 20 months

Your baby needs comfort

Feelings and emotions are more than just thoughts inside our head – they trigger a physical reaction that involves our whole body. Each time we feel happy, sad, scared or anxious, hormones are released into our bloodstream, affecting our pulse rate and breathing and determining how we respond to those around us. Pleasurable feelings trigger the release of hormones such as oxytocin and dopamine, which make us feel and act lovingly towards others, relax us and give us a ‘high’. Stress and fear, on the other hand, trigger hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, which prepare us to respond to danger. In general, calming hormones have a stronger effect, so that when we are comforted our stress hormone levels drop rapidly. This process is known as regulation.

Most adults are capable of recognising when danger has passed, or of finding ways to cheer themselves up when they are feeling miserable – in other words, they can *self-regulate*. Babies and young children can’t do this because they aren’t able to rationalise or control how they feel. They can’t ‘think up’ the release of calming hormones when they are stressed or afraid; they need comfort from someone else for this to happen. Without the counteracting effect of calming hormones the levels of stress hormones take much longer to subside.

'It can be hard to trust your instincts, but I thought: if they cry they need me. Even if it's just comfort - so what?'

Dawn, mother of Layla, 5, and Ruby, 2 years

Babies can't wait

Parents who respond to their baby swiftly when he needs them can sometimes be told they are making a rod for their own back, and that if they don't make him wait he'll never learn to be patient. This really doesn't make sense. Patience requires an awareness of time, a sense of other people's needs and the ability to think things through. These don't develop until well into childhood. A baby whose requests for help don't get a response will at first try harder to make himself heard and understood. How long he keeps trying depends on his personality and on his experience so far, but eventually, if nobody comes, he may well conclude that his attempts at communication are not working and decide to give up trying. But this isn't the same as patience.

If, like most little children, your newborn seems to need a lot of attention it doesn't mean he's destined to always be demanding; it's just that he doesn't yet have the experience or understanding to enable him to wait. Responding quickly to his requests will help him to gain confidence in his ability to communicate with you and to learn, gradually, that he can rely on you to listen. This is the beginning of trust, which is the basis for patience, and of developing an awareness of others' feelings. In fact, research shows that children who have had this sort of nurturing grow up better able to socialise (and to learn) than those who have had less responsive care.

A baby who is not comforted when he cries will eventually settle. Often, he is described as having 'self-soothed'. However, babies can't regulate their own emotions in this way, and research suggests that, even though he has stopped crying, the baby's stress hormone levels may still be quite high. By contrast, babies who are comforted whenever (or almost whenever) they are upset have been shown to have higher levels of beneficial, calming hormones - not only just after a bout of crying but as a general rule.

You won't always be able to make your child's distress better - all babies cry sometimes, and it's impossible to

know what's wrong every time – but by acknowledging his feelings and soothing him when he's upset, even if you can't solve the problem, you will help him learn to deal with stress effectively, which, in turn, will help to provide him with a long-term buffer against the ups and downs of life.

'When my mum was a baby, my gran was told to leave her to cry, unless she needed feeding. She said it broke her heart to do it. She's really envious of me being "allowed" to carry Ben everywhere and amazed at how little he cries.'

Gaby, mother of Ben, 5 months

Your baby needs to feel safe

Feeling safe is important for all of us. It isn't just about knowing we're okay *now*; it's about having a deeper sense of security that gives us the courage to explore new things. Anything unknown or unpredictable is much less scary when looked at from somewhere we feel safe; the more secure a baby feels the more free he will be to learn, and to enjoy new experiences.

The place where a young baby feels safest is in his parent's arms – keeping your baby close to you will help him to get the most out of what's going on around him.

New people and new places can be especially frightening for babies – and it's easy to forget that what is familiar to you may not be to your baby. If it's something he hasn't encountered before, he'll cope with it much better if you're holding him than if he can't feel you near him. Until he can move away and come back to you by himself he is dependent on you to keep him close. Even later on, when he *can* crawl across the room, he will still need you to be available – and he will look for you in the place where he left you. Your baby is the best judge of his need for you; giving him a secure base from which to size up new

situations will allow him to decide when he is ready to explore them.

'I try to treat Bethany with as much respect as I would an older child or my partner. I think some parents are scared to do that in case they have no control. But I've found the opposite is true. She's not afraid of us. Now she's older, if she spills something, she won't hide it – she'll just come and tell us. She's definitely not wild!'

Kate, mother of Bethany, 2 years

Your baby needs opportunities to develop his skills

Babies develop new skills gradually. Although your baby's ability to do something new may seem to appear overnight (one day he can't smile, grab his toes or say 'Dadda', and the next, he can), in reality, he's been leading up to that moment for a long time. For example, it will take him four or five months of trial, error and increasing muscle strength and co-ordination to discover the various combinations of movements that result in rolling over (as well as all those that don't!).

Babies don't need anyone to nudge their development along, but they are reliant on their parents to provide them with opportunities that will give them the best chance of developing at the pace that is right for them. For example, to discover how to roll over, they need enough space and time to experiment – even if it's just when they're in bed or having their nappy changed. And they need to practise and consolidate new skills before they are ready to move on. Each set of movements is built on the last, and involves lots of testing and refinement. Allowing babies to progress in their own time means they are always building on a strong foundation, whereas pushing them to go faster can result in a later skill being less reliable than it should be. It's a bit like an older child trying to do wheelies on his bike before he's learnt to start and stop safely. There aren't any

shortcuts – babies need to practise the basics first, and move on only when they feel ready.

Being baby-led means allowing your baby to extend his range of abilities and have a go at whatever seems to interest him, rather than deciding for him what the next thing should be. It can be as simple as giving him time to explore his fingers or toes, or to touch and play with food. Mostly, it's just a matter of sharing your life with your baby, noticing what he is interested in – and not limiting his experiences or preventing him from trying things because you don't think he's ready. He'll naturally want to look at and handle a variety of objects, so as to develop hand-eye co-ordination and dexterity; to move his limbs to increase strength and agility; and to be talked and listened to, face to face, so he can learn to use facial expressions and speech. Letting him show you what he is capable of, and trusting him to do things in his own time, is the best way to ensure that his development happens at the ideal speed for him.

Developing true independence

The ultimate aim of bringing up a child is sometimes seen as enabling him to achieve independence. This means, literally, having no need of anyone else. This is fine if, like a male tiger cub, the baby is destined to live a lone existence. But it's not appropriate for most people, who need and want to interact with others as part of family groups and communities. Some level of dependence on others is normal and desirable – if we were all totally independent, we wouldn't need clubs, teams or online forums – and most adults are happy to turn to family and friends for some things, even if it's just for comfort when they are feeling down.

Babies and children need support, reassurance and comfort to achieve the right balance of dependence and independence. Those who are pushed to manage on their own before they are ready may appear very independent but this type of independence isn't the same as true self-reliance. In the long term, the need to 'put on a brave face' can mean they find it difficult to ask for help when they need it, or to accept help when it *is* offered. On the other hand, when a baby's abilities are not trusted, or his preferences are disregarded and he is *prevented* from doing things for himself, he may become wary of trusting his own judgement and end up deferring to others in every situation, meaning that the development of true independence is disrupted.

Giving your baby help as and when he shows you he needs it, and trusting him to know both his capabilities and his limitations, is the best way to help him develop a healthy level of self-belief and confidence. As he grows up, this type of support will give him a better chance of being self-reliant when necessary, but able to ask for, and receive, help if it's needed – and to recognise when others need *his* help.

'I was raised in a very gentle way but I didn't realise how much it had influenced me until I had Evelyn. I think it's made everything much easier for me compared to my husband, who was brought up very differently. I seem to have more patience than him. I want Evelyn to be that way if she has children.'

Cheryl, mother of Evelyn, 2 years

What's wrong with being parent-led?

Baby-led parenting isn't new but it is very different from some other approaches. Following your baby's lead is more or less the opposite approach from those that emphasise more parental control, and which usually involve devising

or adopting a pre-determined schedule. Designating times for feeding, sleeping and playing can work for some parents (in the short term, at any rate), but parent-led approaches like this rarely take into account the baby's developmental stage, his individuality, or the fact that his (and his parents') needs and moods change from day to day.

In practice, many parents find trying to follow a schedule leads them into battle with their baby. This is because, at least some of the time, they are likely to have to override his needs – for example, by trying to get him to sleep when he isn't tired, or persuading him to wait when he is trying to tell them he is hungry. Parents who have tried scheduled parenting often say they spend a lot of time comforting their baby while they wait until the 'right' time to give him what he wants.

'Sometimes in the early days I just thought I wasn't very good at being a mum because I hadn't managed to get Lulu to settle in a cot or to go to sleep when she was supposed to, and I fed her whenever she asked. But I just couldn't go against what she seemed to want – I didn't want her to cry. I felt bad about it until I met some mums who did similar things and realised it was okay.'

Annie, mother of Lulu, 2 years

Babies don't need to be persuaded or 'trained' to do things that are completely natural activities. They know when they are tired or hungry and their survival instinct means they will do their best to communicate that need. Trying to persuade a baby to wait when his body tells him he needs something *now* can be exhausting. Fixed schedules also have the potential to seriously disrupt breastfeeding (see [here](#)) and to interfere with sleep (see [here](#)). Many families report, too, that they struggle with the lack of flexibility inherent in a schedule. For example, a long car journey or day spent visiting friends can easily interfere with a pre-planned timetable for eating and sleeping.