

Feeding Skills

DESCRIPTION

When children are learning to feed themselves, do not expect every mouthful to be a success and be prepared for a mess!

Self feeding is a difficult skill to master and requires good postural control, fine motor and eye hand co-ordination.

HELPFUL HINTS

Try and master just a few mouthfuls using the strategies below at first. If your child finds it too difficult they may become frustrated then reluctant to keep trying.

- If appropriate, use a PVC overall with long sleeves and a deep pocket at the bottom.
- Allow plenty of time and use lots of praise, otherwise they can soon lose interest and continue letting you feed them.
- Ensure they have good sitting balance, with their feet firmly on the floor rather than dangling.
- Ensure both hands are free to move.
- Arms should be able to rest supported on the table.
- You may like to try a 'sit fit' or a 'move n sit' cushion to provide your child with additional movement if they tend to get up and walk around during mealtimes.
- Use of a plate guard maybe useful.



- When using a spoon, ensure it is held with a hand-grasp with the thumb going under the handle.
- Adapted cutlery can be useful e.g. 'caring cutlery'. However, ask your therapist for advice.
- To assist with hand to mouth feeding, support the feeding arm at the elbow, this will assist with the effort required to elevate the arm.
- Assist them to load their cutlery effectively. If they are having difficulty, place your own hand over theirs and help them to complete the task. Make sure that the other hand is supporting the bowl/plate to stop it from moving.
- Use non-slip matting (dycem) or blue tack under the bowl/plate to keep it steady.
- Think about the shape of the bowl or plate, does it need a rim? Is it making it difficult to scoop the food? Do they need a plate guard?
- If your child is hyper sensitive to touch, they may object to the sensation of a metal spoon in their fingers or in their mouth. Try plastic ones or ones with a plastic/rubber handle.



- Mealtimes should be enjoyable– try not to become over-anxious as they may pick up on this and become anxious too.
- Once your child starts to master feeding with your help, start to reduce this help.
- Start with foods which are easy to scoop up e.g. sticky foods like yoghurt, custard, porridge and mashed food.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

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Cutting up food:

- At mealtimes, do not expect the child to practise more than two or three cuts.
- Encourage them to slow down and think about each stage of cutting separately (e.g., stab with the fork and then cut with the knife).
- If the child will accept physical help, stand behind them and help the hand with the fork in it to stay still whilst the knife moves back and forth across the food. Expect untidy cutting and some tearing of the food to continue initially.
- Children can find it difficult to monitor the appropriate amount of force to use when cutting. When applying too much force, it may be difficult to cut and press at the same time.
The combination of balancing movement and pressure can be difficult. To help, experiment with different food textures ranging from very hard to soft. Talk about different textures of food and how difficult it is to cut and how hard you need to press. This will increase awareness and hopefully encourage how to exert appropriate pressure and movement relevant to the food.
- To increase the pressure being used, encourage placing the first finger on top of the cutlery, rather than wrapping the whole hand around the handle.

- When cutting food, we adjust the knife with our hands several times. Children tend to hold the knife very tightly and do not adjust it. Encourage movement of the knife with her hand. This will encourage better control and the ability to monitor grip.
- When adults demonstrate cutting, a child will often copy trying to cut in the same direction. We cut food in a diagonal stroke – encourage and emphasise this.

Other activities:

The following activities use some of the same skills necessary for using cutlery. They will give your child opportunity to practice the skills, other than at mealtimes.

- Using a dustpan and brush – emphasise keeping the dustpan still and moving the brush. Your child may be tempted to move both together at the same time.
- Using scissors – start with easy patterns and progress to more complex designs.
- Using playdough – practice cutting using cutlery.
- Playing with clay (or other modelling material).
- Cooking / Baking – holding a bowl while mixing with a spoon or spooning the mixture out of the bowl.
- Colouring – ensure the paper is held with one hand whilst the other hand does the colouring.
- Opening screw top bottles and jars.
- Construction games – E.G. meccano, kinnex.

Any games or activities which encourage the child to hold one hand still whilst moving the other hand will help with the foundation skills for using cutlery.

