



Positioning and environment for mealtimes

It is vitally important that your child is correctly positioned when sat down to eat a meal. They need to feel stable and secure whilst sitting on a chair and need the table to be at the correct height for them when possible. Following the basic principles of good positioning will not only help good cutlery skills but will also promote good concentration skills when eating.

The chair

It is important that the chair is a suitable size, to provide stability when eating:

- Hips bent at 90 degrees
- Feet flat on floor and hip width apart
- Bottom and back supported
- Chair tucked in under the table
- Elbows supported on the table

The table

- Ensure that your child is sat close to the table – make sure that the table is at the right height (e.g. elbows rest comfortably on the table).
- Keep the table space clear from clutter; this will encourage them to concentrate on the task in hand.
- Set the table with knives and forks; where possible encourage the child to help you whilst they wait for their food.

Facilitating feeding

- If you are assisting your child to feed, ensure that you sit next to them on their preferred side (e.g. if they are right handed sit on their right side).
- Initially try hand over hand with them, so support their hand whilst they hold the utensil, when taking the food towards the child's mouth hold their elbow with your other hand to guide their hand up to their mouth.
- Take your time, it can be a slow process but is important for them to learn the sequence and movements required for feeding.

Environment

- Try and remove any unnecessary distractions ie television, radio etc.
- Try to work on cutlery skills when there is ample time, not a rushed meal on the way to being somewhere else.
- Sit your child next to adults who can model good cutlery skills.



Developing feeding skills

When your child is learning to feed themselves, do not expect every mouthful to be a success so 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.

DEVELOPMENT OF FEEDING SKILLS (Mary Sheridan – Children’s developmental progress)

9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds, bites and chews a biscuit. • Puts hands round bottle or cup when drinking.
12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picks up small crumbs, raisins with pincer grasp. • Holds spoon but cannot yet use by themselves.
15 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds spoon, brings to mouth and licks, but usually cannot prevent it from tipping over. • Holds and drinks from cup when adults holds and tips back.
18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds spoon, gets food safely to mouth, chews well. • Holds cup between both hands, drinks without much spillage, but may be unable to place back on table.
2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoon feeds without spilling, chews competently. • Lifts cup and replaces on table without difficulty. • Asks for food and drink.
2 1/2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eats skilfully with spoon and may start to use fork.
3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eats independently with fork and spoon.
4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eats skilfully with fork and spoon
5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses fork competently and beginning to use knife for cutting, but may still need help with tougher textures ie meats.

* These ages are a guide only, but can help determine a young child’s readiness for eating and drinking independently.

Helpful strategies

- Try and master a few mouthfuls using the strategies below as the child will become frustrated and may be reluctant to try again at a later stage.
- Use a PVC apron/bib with long sleeves and a deep pocket at the bottom.
- Allow plenty of time and give regular praise for achievement, otherwise they will soon lose interest and be happy to continue to let you feed.
- Ensure your child has adequate sitting balance, with feet firmly supported rather than dangling and ensure that both hands are free to move. A Tripp Trapp chair may be useful for this. www.backinaction.co.uk, www.TwoLeftFeet.co.uk
- Ensure that the spoon is held with the thumb going under the handle.
- Assist your child to load the spoon effectively. If they are having difficulty, place your own hand over theirs and help them to complete the task. Make sure that the non-feeding arm is supporting the bowl, to ensure that it does not move.
- 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.
- Use non-slip matting under the bowl to keep it steady.
- Mealtimes should be enjoyable – try not to become over-anxious as your child may sense this and also become anxious.
- Once your child is becoming proficient in feeding with your assistance, gradually reduce the amount of assistance.
- Start with foods, which are easy to scoop up. This includes those which stick easily to the spoon such as yoghurt, custard, porridge, mashed and sticky foods.



Handling knives and forks

The following activities use some of the same skills necessary for using cutlery. They will give your child opportunity to practise the skills, other than at mealtimes. Any games or activities that encourage the child to hold one hand still whilst moving the other hand will help with the foundation skills for using cutlery.

Activities

- 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 – practise 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 and Lego

Cutting

- Ensure your child is sitting at a suitable table and chair (with feet supported on the floor or a box). Arms should be able to rest supported on the table.
- At mealtimes, do not expect the child to practise more than two or three cuts.
- Ensure the cutlery is held appropriately (this does not have to be perfect in the first instance, but it does need to be effective. e.g. knife the correct way up.)
- Encourage your child to slow down and think about each stage of cutting separately (e.g. stab with the fork and then cut with the knife)
- If your 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.
- 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 adults demonstrate cutting, a child will often copy trying to cut in the same direction. We cut food in a diagonal stroke.
- Children can find it difficult to monitor the appropriate amount of force to exert when cutting. Also 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.
- 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 their hand. This will encourage better control and the ability to monitor grip.
- Junior Caring Cutlery can be purchased from Amazon; BCA Direct, Dene Centre, Newcastle Tel (0191) 213 0251. They can post the cutlery directly to you. Also available from Nottingham Rehab Supplies Tel: 0845 606 0911 www.nrs-uk.co.uk
- Dycem Matting available in variety of colours and sizes. 20cm by 100cm roll. Dycem Ltd, Ashley Hill Trading Estate, Bristol. Fax: 0117 954 1194