

## Skills for eating and drinking

The following strategies may assist with independence in eating and drinking skills. Remember this is a complex skill which requires good postural control, fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination. Children are likely to get messy when practising!

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

- 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 flat on the floor rather than dangling.
- Ensure both hands are free to move.
- Arms should be able to rest supported on the table.
- Using an inflatable cushion may provide additional movement if children tend to get up and walk around during mealtimes.
- Use of a plate guard may be useful if children are chasing food around the plate trying to scoop it up (available from [www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk), [www.pattersonmedical.co.uk](http://www.pattersonmedical.co.uk), or [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)).
- Adapted cutlery can be useful eg 'caring cutlery', which has moulded grips to prompt correct grasp. This can be purchased from larger Boots stores or [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk). There are junior and adult sizes.
- To assist with hand to mouth feeding, support the feeding arm at the elbow, this will reduce the effort required to elevate the arm.
- Practice loading food onto cutlery effectively. If difficult, use a hand over hand technique to help them to complete the task. Encourage their other hand to support the bowl/plate to stop it from moving.
- Use non-slip matting (dycem) or blue tack under the bowl/plate to stop it moving.
- 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.

- Avoid appearing anxious to the child as this may make them anxious too - mealtimes should be fun!
- Reduce the support you are providing as the child improves to increase independence.
- Start with foods which are easy to scoop up eg sticky foods like yoghurt, custard, porridge and mashed food.

### Cutlery skills

- Children may benefit from practising cutlery skills away from lunch/dinner times, using playdough or 'fun' foods such as a banana or sandwich or during meal preparation or baking.
- Prompt correct grip on the cutlery as this will improve control.
- Encourage using the fork to stabilise the food/ playdough and the knife to 'saw' forward and back.
- When progressing to dinner times start by asking the child to cut up food for the first minute/two mouthfuls so that dinner time does not become stressful. Increase the time period/number of mouthfuls as the child's ability improves.
- Encourage the child to watch other people cutting up food talking through the process as they are doing it.
- Encourage the child to slow down and think about each stage of cutting separately (eg 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 while the knife moves back and forth across the food.
- Expect untidy cutting and some tearing of the food to continue initially.
- Use different food textures ranging from very hard to soft to enable children to practice grading the force of movement needed for cutting.

### General 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

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mealtimes.

- Using a dustpan and brush – emphasise keeping the dustpan still and moving the brush.
- Using scissors – start with easy patterns and progress to more complex designs.
- 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 for example meccano, kinnex.
- Any games or activities which encourage the child to hold one hand still while moving the other hand will help with the foundation skills for using cutlery.

### Fussy eaters

- Encourage variety in diet, tastes and textures by making very small changes to favourite foods, eg mix in a different flavour of yoghurt in to the one they like to see if they tolerate this.
- Avoid having low-nutrition foods available, particularly if the child continually rejects healthier foods. Keep nutritious snacks such as grapes, vegetable sticks and dried fruit available at home.
- Offer healthy choices to give a sense of control.
- Try to limit the number of new foods you introduce at any one time.
- Set aside time for games to try out new tastes such as cheese building blocks or vegetable monsters.
- Serve small portions that aren't overwhelming.
- Have family meals together at regular times, focusing on sharing fun family time rather than what's being eaten.
- Try and keep the setting consistent so that the child is used to it and is comfortable.
- Try a family picnic in the living room on occasion, to reduce formality.
- Think about the amount of people eating. Extra people can create more noise and visual distraction.

### Oral motor development

Oral motor skills are related to movements of the lips, cheeks, tongue and jaw. Motor control in this area is necessary for eating, drinking and swallowing.

- Oral motor activities must be constantly and consistently monitored for safety.
- Be aware of food and non-food allergies when considering oral motor activities.
- If food is the oral motor activity of choice, choose foods that remain in the mouth to help decrease distractions.
- Implement activities at other times from meal times, and in a play context.
- These activities should be introduced gradually.
- Look for clues that the child is distressed and when

appropriate withdraw the oral stimuli.

- Encourage the child to explore their mouth with his/her hands.
- Encourage the child to suck and mouth rubber toys.
- Use a toothbrush to massage and brush the child's gums gently.
- Take turns between brushing the gums and mouthing a rubber toy, or play hide and seek.
- Stimulate the different areas of the mouth using different degrees of pressure eg rub the child's gum with a warm cloth, applying firm sustained pressure and allowing the child to suck or chew the cloth.
- Dip a toothbrush or rubber toy into fruit juice or pureed food and then place it in the child's mouth.
- The taste and texture of different foods should be introduced into oral play as much as possible.
- Desensitize the child's mouth before he/she eats a meal by using a warm cloth inside the child's mouth.
- Blowing bubbles,
- Blowing a ping-pong ball across a table with a straw.
- Whistles etc. – toys involving blowing.
- Blowing up balloons.
- Resistive sucking eg crazy straws drink bottles, thicker liquids.
- Foods – popcorn, crackers, chews etc.
- Slow and deep breaths – about 20.
- Imitating noises and making faces to match eg animal noises.
- Blowing through a straw creating bubbles in your drink.
- Peek-a-boo.
- Singing with a pretend microphone.
- Painting by blowing the paint on paper using a straw.

For further information please contact our advice email [oxl-tr.otadvice@nhs.net](mailto:oxl-tr.otadvice@nhs.net)

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