

A guide on how to help your child with using cutlery



USING CUTLERY

Mealtimes are an important aspect of family life. Children begin to develop self-feeding skills from birth. Self-feeding is a very complex task and it is common for children to have difficulty using cutlery to feed themselves. It usually takes until a child is 7 years old before they can successfully use cutlery to feed themselves without being too messy.

Babies are usually keen to get involved with feeding between 6 and 9 months. They will hold and mouth food from this age and will often be keen to help with feeding and play with a spoon by banging it and mouthing both ends. Between 9 and 13 months they can finger feed with soft foods or those that melt quickly in the mouth. By 14 months children can usually dip a spoon into food and can also move the spoon to their mouths (this is very messy and involves lots of spills). Children then learn to scoop with a spoon to feed themselves. By 24 months children are usually keen to feed themselves and be independent.



Between 2 and 3 years children further develop their spoon feeding skills as well as learning to use a fork to stab. By 5 years a child is learning to spread and cut with a knife. It is often not until they are around 7 years of age that a child can use a knife and fork together to cut up food and are truly independent with self-feeding.

HINTS AND TIPS

- It is important that your child is well positioned when they are learning any new skill. Initially ensure your child is well supported in a high chair or on your lap. You can use cushions or rolled up towels to help your child to stay sitting up straight in their high chair.



- As they grow it is important that their feet and back are supported so that they can use their hands freely. Whenever possible ensure that your child is sitting at a table. You could use a sturdy box under their feet and cushions on the chair to make sure they are well supported.
- Always set the dishes and utensils out in the same way to develop a routine and help your child locate items at each meal.
- Think about the utensils you are using. Spoons or forks with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. A spoon or fork with a short handle is easier to control. Consider the weight of the cutlery. Sometimes something heavier can be easier to control. Use a bowl or plate with a raised edge so the child has something to scoop against. Place a non-slip mat underneath the bowl or plate to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to scoop, stab, spread or cut.



- Take your time and be consistent. Learning a new skill takes time so persevere with giving support until you feel that the child is making progress.
- Practice, practice, practice! Give your child opportunities for practice every day.
- A good way to teach your child a new skills, is to break down each task into small steps and teach them the last step first (backward chaining). Once they can do the last step of the task, teach them the second-last step, then the third-last step and so on.
- Children learn in different ways so you might need to vary your approach. There are a number of ways in which you can help;
 - Physically assist your child (Use the hand-over-hand technique, the child grasps the spoon while the adult puts their hand over the top of the child's).
 - Show your child - do the task alongside your child.
 - Tell your child - talk your child through each step of the process.



You can use each of these ways individually or any combination depending on what suits your child. Please be aware that some children cannot look and listen at the same time so limit the amount of information you giving.

- Think about the food you are using. Will it stick to the spoon rather than slide off, is it soft enough for your child to stab with a fork or cut with a knife?
- Encourage a good cutlery grasp right from the start; your child's index finger should point down the back of the fork or knife towards the prongs and blade.
- Work on one aspect of using a knife at a time e.g. spreading or cutting.
- You can also practice using a spoon, fork and knife (for cutting and spreading) during other activities e.g. when playing with play dough or during craft activities.

