

Occupational Therapy Team

# FEEDING SKILLS

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## Contents

	<b>Page Number</b>
Contents	2
Positioning for Meal Times	3
Feeding Skills	4
Self-Feeding with a Spoon	5 - 6
Cutlery Skills	7
Cutting Skills	8
Adapted Cutlery	9 - 10

## Positioning for Meal Times

It is vitally important that children are correctly positioned when sitting 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 facilitate 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 flexed at 90 degrees
- Feet flat on floor (or footplate) and hip width apart.
- Bottom and back supported.
- Chair tucked in under the table.
- Elbows supported on the table.
- Work out a simple physical reminder such as a slight stroke down the back or tap on the shoulder when posture is poor.
- If children are in specialist seating, ensure that they are firmly held in the chair with the lap and chest straps and if they have a waistcoat on make sure it is reasonably tight fitting over their shoulders.



### **The Table**

- Ensure that the child is sitting close to the table.
- Ensure that the table is at the right height so that the 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 while they wait for their food.

## Feeding Skills

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.

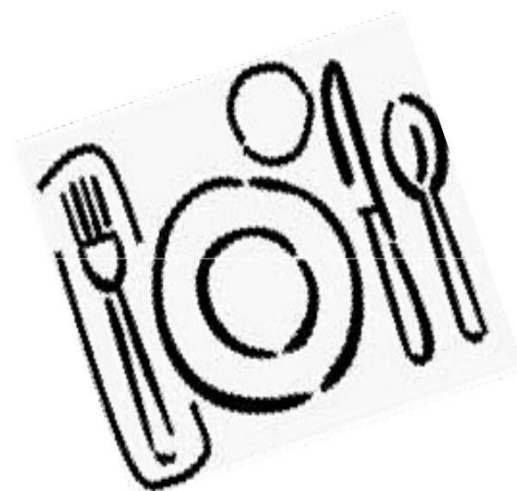


- Try and master a few mouthfuls at a time as the child may become frustrated and may be reluctant to try again at a later stage.
  - Use a PVC overall with long sleeves and a deep pocket at the bottom to minimise the clean up.
  - Allow plenty of time and give plenty of praise for achievement, otherwise they will soon lose interest and be happy to continue to let you feed them.
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- 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 (or similar) may be useful for this [www.backinaction.co.uk](http://www.backinaction.co.uk), [www.TwoLeftFeet.co.uk](http://www.TwoLeftFeet.co.uk)
  - Ensure that the spoon is held with a hand-grasp, with the thumb going under the handle.
  - Adapted cutlery with larger handles can be useful. See page 9 for stockists.
  - Use non-slip matting (dycem) under the bowl to keep it steady.
  - To help with correct placement, place your hand lightly over the child's hand, turning the root of his thumb outwards with your own thumb.
  - Mealtimes should be enjoyable. Try not to become over-anxious because this may increase your child's anxiety.
  - Once the child is becoming proficient in feeding with your assistance, gradually reduce the amount of assistance.



## Self-Feeding with a Spoon

- Ensure that your child is positioned in a supportive seat to enable them to use their hands freely during meal times.
- Encourage your child to keep their hands in contact with the work surface and make scanning or trailing motions with their fingers to identify the location and height of objects. E.g. is there a bowl? A cup? A spoon? It may be useful to use a placemat to define the eating area.
- Always set dishes and utensils in the same way to develop routine and help your child locate items at each meal.
- When encouraging your child to use a spoon use foods that stick to the spoon e.g. yoghurt, porridge, and mashed potato, as these are less likely to spill so the child has more chance of succeeding.



### **Teach feeding in small steps**

Start by supporting the action completely. Gradually reduce the amount of physical support you provide as the child becomes more independent.

1. Encourage them to hold a spoon or cup whilst feeding so they get used to handling feeding tools.
2. Help the child scoop the food, bring the spoon up to the mouth and put the spoon into the mouth. The child is responsible for removing the food.
3. Help the child scoop the food and bring the spoon up to the mouth. The child is responsible for putting the spoon into the mouth and removing the food.
4. Help the child scoop the food. The child is responsible for bringing the spoon up to the mouth, putting the spoon into the mouth and removing the food.
5. The child can use the spoon independently.

### Ways to assist the use of a spoon

- The child can hold onto the feeder's hand as the spoon is brought to the mouth.
- The child can hold the spoon as the feeder holds the end to provide minimal guidance.
- The feeder holds the spoon in the child's palm with their thumb and place the fingers on the back of the wrist.
- Feeder helps the child bring the elbow up to shoulder height after the food has been scooped from the bowl. This helps prevent the child from turning the spoon and spilling the food on the way to the mouth.

### Adapted Spoons & Bowls

- Spoons with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold.
- A spoon with a short handle is easier to control, reducing spillage.



- Use a bowl with a raised edge so the child has something to scoop against.
- Place a non-slip mat underneath the bowl to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to scoop.
- A variety of shaped bowls and spoons are available in local high street stores such as Mothercare and Boots.



## Cutlery Skills

The following activities use some of the same skills necessary for using cutlery. They will give your child the opportunity to practice 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 for Developing Cutlery Skills

- 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.
- 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, K'nex, Duplo, Lego, etc.



Fine motor activities will also help to develop cutlery skills. Try the following activities and also see the 'Fine Motor Skills' Booklet for more information

- Elastic bands stretched between fingers
- Theraputty/play dough programme
- Connecting Unicubes
- Jenga
- Solitaire
- Tiddliwinks and marbles
- Dominoes
- 'Paper Football'. Tear tissue paper into small thin strips, roll the strips into balls using finger tips. Flick paper balls into a goal area.



## Cutting Skills

- At mealtimes, do not expect the child to practice more than two or three cuts.
- As a general rule, the child should hold the knife in their dominant hand.
- Give your child a blunt knife at first and get them to hold a play-dough sausage still with their fingers and then cut the play-dough with the knife just in front of their fingers, using backwards and forwards strokes.
- When your child gets really good at using the knife (with backward and forward movements) then you can introduce a fork.
- Remind your child to hold the food still with the fork, and remind them to cut with the knife by moving it back and forth slowly.
- Your child may find it useful to repeat the phrase “Hold still with the fork, backwards and forwards with the knife” as they cut up the food to remind them of what to do.
- 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.
- At first, expect them to cut up soft foods and help them with tougher foods like meat. Then as they get better, expect them to try to cut up tougher foods, e.g. tell them they have to cut two pieces and then you will do the rest. Slowly build up the amount you expect them to do.
- To increase the pressure being used, encourage your child to put their index fingers along the back of the cutlery.
- 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 tightly and do not adjust it. Encourage movement of the knife in their hand. This will encourage better control and the ability to monitor grip.





## **Adapted Cutlery**

There are a variety of aids that can assist using cutlery:

- Non-slip place mat
- Adapted cutlery
- Serrated edge knife
- Adapted crockery
- Dessert-sized cutlery

Cutlery with thick, chunkier handles can be easier for a child to hold and use.

Examples are:



### Good Grips Cutlery

Available from:

Welcome Mobility, Daily Living Aids and Mobility Equipment

[www.welcomemobility.co.uk](http://www.welcomemobility.co.uk)

NRS, Aids for Daily Living

[www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk)

Priced from: £7.98



### Junior Caring Cutlery

Available from:

Welcome Mobility, Daily Living Aids and Mobility Equipment

[www.welcomemobility.co.uk](http://www.welcomemobility.co.uk)

NRS, Aids for Daily Living

[www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk)

Priced from: £6.38



Dycem Mat

Available From

NRS, Aids for Daily Living

[www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk)

Patterson Medical

[www.pattersonmedical.co.uk](http://www.pattersonmedical.co.uk)

Priced From: £4.99