

Advice sheet

## Developing cutlery skills

The first thing for parents and carers to consider is try not to worry about mess. When a child is learning this skill, it will be messy. This is an important stage in their development.

### Why do some children find this skill difficult?

There are many reasons why children find using cutlery difficult; including incorrect seated position, lack of experience, movement, coordination or learning difficulties.



### What you may observe:

- Choosing to use their hands and not cutlery.
- Difficulties grasping and holding the cutlery within the hand.
- Difficulty using each hand at the effectively
- Messy eating with lots of spillage
- Unable to stab with the fork and cut with the knife

### Strategies for success

The following activities require coordinated use of both hands and are similar skills required for using cutlery effectively. They can be practiced in a playful way to develop hand skills. This should also support more successful use of cutlery during self-feeding.

- Hammering activities e.g. Tap-a-Shape, toy worktools
- Scooping non-food items such as sand or small stones into a bucket.
- Colouring – steady the paper with one hand whilst the other colours.
- Construction games – E.g. Lego, bead threading, K'nex.
- Cooking / Baking – any two handed task, e.g. mixing bowl and spoon
- Using play dough / modelling material – use cutlery to cut.

### When the time is right for cutlery:

- Consider the child's sitting posture. Their feet should be supported.
- Make sure the table is a good height for the child so that they can prop their elbows at 90 degrees on the table.
- Expect mess when starting out. Practice feeding with cutlery when time is not so pressured.
- Using cutlery is a three stage process introduce the spoon, then the fork and finally the knife
- Consider the size and shape of cutlery. Try and make it fun with a favourite character or brightly coloured cutlery

- Try using child size cutlery or cutlery with chunky handles for children who have a loose or weak grip
- Use either a non-slip mat or a damp cloth underneath the bowl /plate to prevent it slipping
- **Lead by example.** Try to eat with your child when you can so they have the opportunity to copy you
- Practice during playtime is a great opportunity to integrate this skill. An imaginary tea party or by pretending they are feeding dolls or teddies for example.

### Using a spoon:

- Introduce the spoon as early as possible, immediately after weaning or between 9 and 12 months as a play object.
- Initially your child will play with it but eventually they will make an association between the spoon, their mouth and eating.
- When your child shows they can hold the spoon and place it in their mouth, help to guide them in holding the loaded spoon. Assist them by supporting either at the elbow if they can hold the spoon, or by using your hand over theirs to feel the movements they need to make. Gradually aim to give less and less help. They may need you to place the spoon in their
- hand to make the correct grip at this stage.
- Allow your child to finish off what's left in the bowl to practise self feeding if you do not want all the food spilled. This will provide them with the success of finishing the task
- Give sticky foods that will readily stick to the spoon like porridge, mashed potato, sticky rice, puddings etc.

### Using an open cup:

- Start by using a cup with two handles to help your child gain stability and hold the cup steadily.
- Initially only half fill the cup to reduce spills
- Progress to a one handled cup and then on to the child holding a beaker using both hands.
- To help your child make a good lip seal around the cup, practise using
- thickened liquids like smoothies, milkshakes or yoghurt drinks to give
- them more time to get organised
- Gradually lessen the support you offer and allow them to hold and bring the cup to their mouth and then tip it to drink from it
- As with feeding, encourage them to sit in a good position so that they have the best control of their arms and their body to make a slow and graded movement when tipping the cup to drink from it
- Some children like cups they can see into or cups that are tilted to reduce how far they have to tip their heads back e.g. Flexi cups or Doidy cups.

### Using a fork:

- Once your child can use a spoon, you can introduce a fork
- Offer your child a child size, easy grip fork at first
- **Begin by loading the fork for your child,** then move on to foods that are easy for them to stab like fruit or cooked vegetables
- **Finally progress to offering the spoon and fork together** let them practise holding two pieces of cutlery at the same time.