



Self Care Eating Meals

Using a Spoon Information Sheet

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.

Hints and Tips

- It is important that your child is well supported 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 with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. A spoon 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 to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to scoop.
- When encouraging your child to use a spoon use foods that stick to the spoon (e.g. yoghurt, porridge, mashed potato). These are less likely to spill, so the child has more chance of succeeding.





- 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. Here is one way to break the task down into steps:

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

- Start by encouraging your child to hold a spoon or cup whilst feeding so they get used to handling feeding tools.
- Help your child scoop the food, bring the spoon up to their mouth and put the spoon into their mouth. Your child is responsible for removing the food.
- Help your child scoop the food and bring the spoon up to their mouth. Your child is responsible for putting the spoon into their mouth and removing the food.
- Help your child scoop the food. Your child is responsible for bringing the spoon up to their mouth, putting the spoon into their mouth and removing the food from the spoon.
- Your child can now try using the spoon independently - expect some mess!



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 (see below for more details).
- 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.



Ways to physically assist your child using a spoon

- The child can hold onto the feeder's hand as the spoon is brought to their mouth.
- The feeder holds the spoon in the child's palm with their thumb and places their fingers on the back of the wrist.
- Hand-over-hand – the child grasps the spoon while the feeder puts their hand over the top of the child's.
- The child grasps the spoon and the feeder holds the end to guide the movement.
- The child grasps the spoon while the feeder helps the child by supporting and guiding from the elbow.
- You can also practice using a spoon during other activities e.g. when playing with play dough, when playing with sand or water or during craft activities.

