

Eating and drinking skills

Developmental milestones for eating and drinking skills*

Age	Developmental dressing skills/milestones
1 year olds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to drink out of a sippy cup without help • Able to feed self finger foods • Plays with spoon, although not used for self-feeding
18 months – 2 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to self-feed with a spoon without spilling too much for easier food items (e.g. yoghurt, porridge) • Able to drink from an open cup – though many continue to use a sippy cup or sports bottle
2–3 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to reject food (new foods and often foods previously accepted) • Preferences for foods are now likely to predict food preferences throughout life • Begins to develop skill in using a fork, particularly stabbing • Is able to self-feed using a spoon for more difficult food items (e.g. cereal with milk) without little spillage

*These milestones are intended as a guide only. The way in which a child develops their eating and drinking skills is highly dependent on experience and opportunities to practise, family/cultural expectations and the child's choices and motivation. Please also consider your child's developmental levels, this can be impacted by a number of factors.

Have a think about the last time you learnt a new skill; what was it that helped you learn this? How did you feel? What kept you motivated to keep going, even when it felt difficult? How many times did you practise before the new skill became automatic? If you were to do it again, is there anything you would do differently?

Things to consider when taking part in mealtimes

- ✔ **Environment:** Consider the noise, lighting and smells. What helps your child to concentrate? Reduce distractions when possible to help your child to develop their feeding skills
- ✔ **Positioning:** Ensure your child is sat with a stable base, feet supported on the floor. Consider using a box turned upside down or a step if their feet can't reach the floor
- ✔ **Timing:** If your child is very hungry or tired, they are less likely to want to practice their eating and drinking skills
- ✔ **Utensils:** Using a bowl or plate with a raised edge helps with scooping. Chunky cutlery which is light weight is easier to hold. Training cups which have handles, reduced flow or are shaped to allow the child to see the liquid can make the task easier. Placing a sticker on the cutlery can be useful as a visual prompt of where to place index fingers for a comfortable grasp. Use a damp cloth under the plate/bowl if it usually slides about



Setting the 'just right' challenge with your child

It is important to enable your child to gain a sense of achievement when learning a new skill. The 'just right' challenge ensures that you are encouraging your child to develop their skills and independence, whilst ensuring that the goal they are working towards is realistic. The sense of achievement that they experience acts as a great motivator to encourage your child to keep working towards mastering these skills. Setting realistic and achievable goals with your child can help them to develop their independence with feeding.



Things to consider:

- How much liquid is in the cup?
- What food are you expecting them to eat by themselves? Do they like the food?
- How much of the meal do you expect your child to feed themselves?
- Does your child know how to hold the cutlery?

Top tips for supporting your child in developing their skills?

- ✓ **Family mealtimes:** are a great opportunity for your child to learn. They will be able to copy you using cutlery
- ✓ **Food:** start with easier items of food, such as stickier foods when using a spoon and softer foods when using a knife and fork (like well-boiled vegetables)
- ✓ **Verbal prompts:** using simple verbal prompts such as “stab” with the fork, “cut/saw” with the knife can really help
- ✓ **Visual prompts:** such as using your hands to gesture the actions required to cut up food
- ✓ **Hand-over-hand-assistance:** some children find it helpful to have ‘hands on’ help to experience the action required. Help your child to know what it feels like to cut up their food
- ✓ **Praise:** make sure to give lots of it! Identify clearly what action they have done which you are proud of
- ✓ **Practice:** the skills required away from mealtimes so there is reduced pressure. For example, you could practice pouring liquids into cups in the bath, baking, or cutting up Play-Doh using cutlery



Opening food packaging

Opening cans, bottles and packets requires well developed hand strength and fine motor skills, therefore younger children can find this tricky!

- ✓ Consider starting the process off first, and then allowing your child to finish it. The beginning is usually the hardest bit
- ✓ Use verbal prompts like “pinch and pull”
- ✓ Working over a bowl or table might help to catch any spills whilst a child is learning the force needed for success
- ✓ Encourage your child to monitor their own progress by asking them questions about how they are doing, such as “how did that go?”, “what could make it easier?”



If you have concerns about your child’s appetite or their ability to swallow food or drink please refer to your GP, health visitor or school nurse for further advice and support.



References:

Carruth. B. R *et al* (2004) “Developmental Milestones and Self-Feeding Behaviors in Infants and Toddlers”. American Dietetic Association. 104. S51-S56.
 Novak. I, and Honan. I (2019) “Effectiveness of Paediatric Occupational Therapy for Children with Disabilities: A Systematic Review”. Australian Occupational Therapy Journal. 66. 3. 258-273.

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