



Building Mealtime Skills

The development of cutlery skills and sitting posture is integral for a child's learning to self-feed with independence. When looking at these areas, the first and foremost need is to understand general age-appropriate developmental norms for self-feeding, as well as the child's individual stage, which may differ due to natural variations between children.

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On the next pages are some tips to support your child in making those steps toward using cutlery and sitting at the table independently.



Cutlery Selection and Mealtime Set-up

- Cutlery with shorter, thicker handles or ergonomic, easy-to-grip designs can significantly improve a child's control.
- Some kids also benefit from cutlery with a bit of weight to it, as it allows for more sensory feedback to the hand.
- Provide plates and bowls that are stable (do not slide) and have high sides or raised edges for learning to stab and scoop food.
- A non-slip mat under dishes may be considered to further ensure they stay in place.



- A spoon and fork are held with the thumb and index finger on top and the middle finger supporting underneath.
- When using a knife and fork together, hold the fork like a pencil, with the index finger resting on the top, near the base, pointing towards the prongs. The knife uses the same grip, with the index finger pointing down the back of the blade.

- A right-handed child will cut from left to right so that the cut portion can remain on the fork and go straight to the mouth. For a left-handed child, cut instead from right to left to accommodate their hand preference.
- Consider food consistencies. Sticky foods are best for teaching to scoop. Soft foods are best for teaching how to use a fork. Soft, long or log-shaped foods are best for teaching to use a fork and knife together.



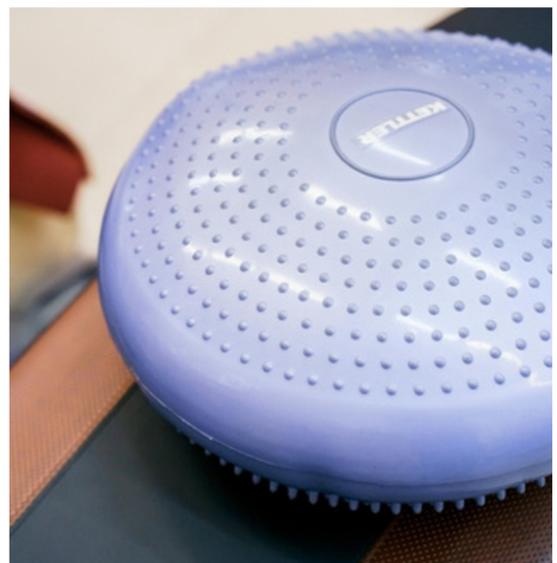
Mealtime Seating and Postural Support

- Encourage an upright seated posture (e.g. back supported and straight, feet supported on the floor or another stable surface). This will make the child feel secure, and they will have better control of their hands and arms.
- For younger children, highchairs and booster seats ensure appropriate table height and foot support. Nursery and younger primary school-aged children may benefit from using child-sized tables and chairs during meals or when practising related skills.



- Sitting at an adult-sized dining table can be appropriate, as it offers important social and learning benefits. However, modifications may be required, such as cushions, boosters, or adjustable chairs to increase seated height and reduce seat depth, and a low stool or sturdy box for foot support.

- Allow for some flexibility with seated positionings. Some children struggle to stay upright for a long period of time, even if they start that way. Small amounts of fidgeting and changing of position can actually support your child in remaining seated, especially if for extended time frames, like family meals.
- If a child really struggles to remain upright and/or seated, sensory tools, like a 'wobble' cushion, can provide additional movement input, making sitting easier.



Additional Mealtime Suggestions

- Create a routine. Setting out utensils and dishes the same way each mealtime builds consistency, so the child knows what to expect.
- Have the child eat with other people whenever possible, both at home and school. This will further support skill development through modelling and social learning.



- Limit eating in front of electronics, as this will reduce attention, which is needed when learning new skills such as managing cutlery.
- Give them a 'just right' challenge. For example, if your child is just learning to use a knife and fork together, give them a mix of foods, not just those that involve cutting.

- Consider the sensory environment. If a child is easily distracted by sounds or sights, struggles to remain seated, or shows behaviours of touch, taste or smell sensitivity around certain foods, they may benefit from practising cutlery skills in a quieter, more controlled environment.

Keep on practicing these skills and watch your child's mealtime skills develop.



Learning Mealtime Skills through Play

- Practising cutlery skills at other times of the day will strengthen underlying skills in a low-pressure context.
- Encourage imaginative play around preparing and eating meals.
- Make time to 'play with food' when the child is not hungry. Some children can struggle to manage their emotions during mealtimes. In these cases, the child may do better with practising cutlery skills elsewhere in the day to build skills.
- Have your child join in with food preparation or baking, as these opportunities allow for the practice of cutlery skills in a different context.
- Build on fine motor skills like strength and dexterity (*see below for ideas*).



Games and Activities to Support Cutlery Skill Development

- Picking up small items with cloth pegs and tweezers to build on finger strength.
- Tasks like drawing, writing, and painting will help to build on utensil-grasping skills.
- Block construction using age-appropriate toys like wooden blocks, Duplo, Lego, or K'nex, will build on using coordination, as needed for using a knife and fork.
- Activities that involve scooping, stabbing, rolling out or cutting with materials such as Play-Doh, sensory bins, or toy food, will encourage practice of related-cutlery skills through play.
- Tearing paper and cutting paper with scissors will build on hand strength and using two hands together.
- Strengthen the arms and body, too! Child-friendly exercises, like Animal Walks and Yoga, encourage crawling, walking and holding a position on hands/arms and knees/feet. These are all highly beneficial for building the muscles needed to remain seated and manage cutlery.
- Encourage your child to participate in age-appropriate chores- squeezing a spray bottle will strengthen fingers. Wiping the table down will develop hand and arm strength. Using a dustpan and brush will encourage using both hands together.

Additional Teaching Strategies

- When possible, focus on one skill at a time.
- Praise the child for all successes, no matter how small.
- Consider using hand-over-hand support to learn new movements if the child struggles to imitate or prefers less efficient positions.
- Break tasks into smaller, manageable steps (eg focus on just a few steps at a time).
- Narrate using simple phrases, for example, when teaching knife skill say, 'stab, slide, saw'.
- Try backwards chaining- This consists of breaking the task down into small steps, teaching the child the last step first, then working backwards from the goal. For more information visit our [Activity Booklet: Dressing Skills, Backward Chaining Page 3](#).
- Adjust the level of challenge if the child becomes easily overwhelmed or resistant to using cutlery. For example, consider turn-taking or taking over the task from the child after a set number of attempts or a timeframe.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Some children benefit from frequent repetition of a movement to build their muscle memory (make it more 'automatic') and build confidence.

When it might be time to seek additional support:

If a parent, carer, or educator identifies a delay or discrepancy in cutlery skill development or other related skills (eg sitting abilities), implementing generalised strategies may be sufficient for increasing progress. However, if the child's challenges become significant or limited progress is made after implementing generalised advice (such as the exercises in this booklet), input from an occupational therapist would be recommended. Occupational therapists are highly trained in supporting children with various functional skill development challenges, including those related to self-feeding.

Some children will have needs that require more bespoke input from professionals. Occupational therapists can play a central role in supporting children with various functional skill development challenges, including those related to self-feeding.



Little Steps, Big Progress

Mealtime Skills

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