

PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE WITH SELF-FEEDING IN TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

Self-care skills including feeding and using utensils are very much a part of our everyday lives. It is important to foster an interest, as well as your child's cooperation at an early age, for independence in self-care tasks for several reasons including:

- Self-esteem development
- Active physical participation
- Therapeutic benefits

Never miss an opportunity to encourage your child to be independent. Because they occur daily, self-care tasks can be practiced on a regular basis.

To Promote Independence

- Recognize and encourage any attempt or efforts your child makes to help with/complete the tasks. Encourage and praise them, no matter how small the attempt.
- Establish a place and routine for encouraging self-care independence.
- Allow time for your child time to respond and attempt to participate or complete the task.
- With repetition and practice, your child will begin to anticipate the next step and you will be able to withdraw your cues.
- Consider the position your child is in during the task. They need to feel physically secure in order to participate – feet flat on floor, knees and hips bent.
- Act as a model for your child. This is most easily done by sitting in front of your child.
- Provide verbal cues for self-care. Talk with your child while completing the task.
- Backward chaining may help. Ask your child to assist with the last step in the sequence. Gradually add steps until your child is able to complete the tasks independently.

Self-Feeding

Encouraging independent self-feeding can be a balance between adequate nutritional intake and physical independence. Public Health Sudbury and Districts has some helpful handouts available on “Introducing solid foods,” and “Texture of complimentary foods.”

Encouraging Feeding Readiness:

- Encourage your child to bring their hands to their mouth
- Encourage oral motor exploration using safe toys (and soft utensils) for mouthing and chewing
- Encourage lots of touching, feeling and exploring a variety of foods, including getting messy and tasting purees from their tray
- Encourage play and experimentation with a spoon (grasping spoon and bringing to mouth)
- Encourage your child to hold their bottle independently

Encouraging Oral Motor And Self-Feeding Skills:

- Gradually increase the texture of foods (between 6 and 9 months is often a good time to try mashed and lumpy textures, and very soft finger foods).
- Oral motor movements and chewing develop as child gains experience with soft foods.
- With close supervision, if you feel it is safe for you child you can encourage “gnawing” on wide stick-shaped solids that you know your child cannot bite off a piece (e.g. carrot, pepperette or pickle that are at least as wide as a marker), or on a slice of apple wrapped in cheese cloth where the child can chew and get the taste, but the food stays safely inside the fabric.
- When ready, try dissolvable crackers, Mum Mum cookies, or dissolvable “Puffs” that help to teach munching, but melt in your child’s mouth if they do not chew them properly.
- Encourage your child to participate in feeding themselves including picking up solids, or bringing a filled spoon to their mouth.

Steps in the Development of Utensil Skills:

- Child closes lips on spoon to remove food and swallows with closed mouth
- Child scoops and feeds self with spoon, with many spills
- Child begins to use a fork
- With practice, child is able to self-feed with spoon with little spillage and use a fork consistently.

Choosing Utensils and Dishes:

- Choose short, thick handled spoons as they are more comfortable and easier to control for small hands, compared to adult-sized cutlery.
 - This resource is available electronically with links to an example of the products: [Short/thick handled spoons and forks](#)



- Encourage child to hold their dish with one hand while using the spoon in the other; bowls with non-slip bottoms and lipped edges encourage success. Consider a bowl with a suction cup bottom when first learning to use a spoon. The suction cup helps to secure the bowl/plate to the table if the child is not yet using their helper hand to hold their bowl/plate steady. The raised lip on one side of the bowl also assists with scooping.
 - This resource is available electronically with links to an example of the products: [Suction cup bowls/plates](#)



General Strategies to Promote Independence with Utensils:

- Provide modelling while sitting facing the child, so that the child can try to mimic self-feeding.
- Provide hand over hand assistance to help practice scooping movement.
- Use cue word “scoop” while you’re helping them scoop the food onto their utensil.
- Also provide hand over hand assistance to bring their utensil to their mouth, or just to initiate the movement, if needed.
- While learning to self-feed with a spoon, use foods that are not easily eaten with hands and that stick to the spoon so will not easily spill. For example: oatmeal, pudding and yogurt).
- During playtime, also try to pretend feeding baby doll with spoon.

****Please note that this handout reviews general strategies that may not be appropriate for all children. Direct supervision is important during feeding to ensure safety. Consult with your family physician or nurse practitioner if you have concerns regarding your child’s feeding skills.***