

# the early years toolkit

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## Developing cutlery skills

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

There are many reasons why children find using cutlery difficult, including movement or learning difficulties. Lack of experience can also impact on their level of skill, for example a child who mainly has finger foods may not get the chance to practise and therefore develop cutlery skills.

If you have used this Advice Sheet and have not seen improvement within 6 months, please contact CYPIT.

### What you may see

- Reluctance to use cutlery, opting to use hands. Avoidance of certain types of food that would require cutlery
- Difficulties holding the cutlery in the hand.
- Some problems with knowing what to do with each hand at the right time
- A loose and/or awkward grip
- Messy eating with lots of spillage
- Unable to stab with the fork and cut effectively with the knife
- A reluctance to feed themselves

### Strategies and Advice

- Expect messy eating when starting out. Practice feeding just before bath time and when time is not so pressured
- Consider the size and shape of cutlery. Try using child size cutlery or cutlery with chunky handles for children who have a loose or weak grip
- Make sure the bowl is not slipping using either a non-slip mat or a damp cloth underneath
- 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.
- Try to eat with your child when you can so they have the opportunity

to copy you.

### Using a spoon:

- Introduce the spoon between 9 and 12 months. Initially your child will play with it but eventually they will make an association between the utensil and eating.
- When your child is happy to 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.
- Give sticky foods that will readily stick to the spoon like porridge, mashed potato, sticky rice, puddings etc.
- Practice using the spoon in play with your child feeding you or their dollies or teddies.

### Using an open cup:

- Start by using a cup with two handles to help your child hold the cup steady.
- After this you can 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.
- Only fill the cup half way up or less to reduce spillage.
- Try to offer less and less help and gradually allow your child to hold and bring the cup to their mouth and then tip it to drink from it.
- Encourage your child to sit still 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 at mealtimes
- Offer your child a child size, easy grip fork at first.

- Let the child practise initially taking foods off the fork you have loaded for them, then progress to foods that are easy for them to stab like fruit or cooked vegetables.
- Eventually offer the spoon and fork together at mealtimes to let them practise holding two pieces of cutlery at the same time.

If you do not see an improvement in six months of using this Advice Sheet and you are concerned about your child's development please contact CYPIT for further advice.