

the early years toolkit

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Finger feeding

Why do some children find this difficult?

You have been directed to this Advice Sheet to help you encourage the baby or child you are caring for to learn this developmental skill. If you notice they have closed or fisted hands, please contact CYPIT for further advice.

Your child may be finding it hard to move on to finger foods because they have some movement or sensory difficulties. They may alternatively have some oral difficulties which make it hard for them to manage bigger lumps. If you suspect your child has feeding or drinking difficulties, you must make sure the child is not offered food that is unsafe for them to swallow. If you have observed choking episodes, or are already receiving the advice of one of the Feeding Team, then please contact CYPIT for further advice before trying this Advice Sheet.

What you may see

You may see that the baby or child

- dislikes picking up the food or getting their hands messy
- has difficulty picking up the food
- may dislike lumpy food (often described as stage 2 foods)

Strategies and Advice

To encourage movement skills:

- Ensure the baby has head control and is preferably able to sit unsupported.
- If they are unable to do so due to having special needs then ensure you have the right seating equipment.
- Make sure the baby can bring their hands to their mouth to explore objects. If they cannot, please seek advice from CYPIT.
- Make sure the baby is seated in a suitable chair or on your lap which is giving them support to keep their body or trunk still and use their hands in a controlled way.

- Offer finger food on a surface within their reach at the right height. The surface should be level with their elbow when sitting unless you are handing it to them.
- Food should be the right size for their stage of development. Initially they will be using their whole hand to pick up so may struggle to grasp a tiny raisin.

To encourage sensory skills:

- Do not wipe their hands if they are not complaining – expect your baby or child to get messy.
- Reassure them if they are uncomfortable with the mess. Have a damp flannel or cloth in view and encourage them to touch it if they need to wipe.
- Try to distract them away from the mess if they are complaining or get messy yourself to show them it is nothing to worry about.
- Try using foods that do not leave a residue, such as baby bread sticks, rice cakes, dry cereal or prawn crackers.
- Dry off fruit with a paper towel to take away some of the excess juice that may run down their arms when they are eating.
- Offer cooked vegetables that may be less sticky than fruit, for example soft cooked carrot sticks, baby sweet corn or courgette pennies.

To encourage oral or mouth skills:

- Ensure baby is coping safely with stage 1 or purée food first. Ideally they should also be coping with lumpy or stage 2 foods as well (for 7 to 9 month old babies).
- Ensure that baby can move their tongue up and down, side to side and spit out to safely cope with finger food.
- Foods that dissolve in the mouth are usually the safest to try if this is the first time. Try snacks like Goodies Organic and Baby Organix snack range. Let them hold them to suck on first.
- Have a drink to hand if they need to clear their mouth between mouthfuls.
- Consider putting fleshy, juicy foods in a net bag for your child to chew on
- Always offer food that is safe to be swallowed if biting and chewing is still being developed so as to avoid choking episodes, especially with grapes or cherry tomatoes which need cutting up.

- Try offering lightly toasted wholemeal bread to introduce sandwiches as it is less likely to get stuck in the roof of their mouth.

If you see no improvement with skills development after three months of using this Advice Sheet, please contact CYPIT for further advice.

Examples of Finger Foods

Bite and Dissolve:

- Rice cakes
- Sponge fingers
- Wafer biscuit
- Maize snacks
- Meringues
- Goodies Organic and Baby Organix snack range

Bite and Chew Easily:

- Ripe peeled avocado
- Soft cooked vegetables e.g. carrot, courgette, swede or broccoli
- Ripe peeled pear, nectarine, banana, or cooked apple
- Tinned mandarins
- Hot dog sausages
- Hard boiled eggs
- Cooked filleted fish
- Grated cheese
- Soft cooked pasta

Bite and Stay Firm (requires a lot of chewing):

- Fresh apple or pear
- Raw vegetables e.g. carrot and celery
- Dried fruit e.g. raisins or apricots
- Meat e.g. ham or chicken slices
- Fish fingers
- Chicken Nuggets
- Sausages
- Breadsticks
- Toast
- Crackers or cheese biscuit
- Potato crisps
- Hard cheeses