

SELF-CARE EATING MEALS

MEAL TIME ENVIRONMENT

Sitting at the Table

It is important to consider where your child sits to eat. It affects their stability and balance to allow them to use their hands effectively, just as it does for writing. Otherwise we put a lot of effort into sitting and this can distract (even subconsciously) from what we are trying to do. It also impacts on the social aspects of meal times, as well as the skill development. For many busy families today mealtimes can be a great time to catch up on everyone's news, share what you have been up to.



Sitting at a dining table allows your child to be part of the group and enjoy the social benefits of eating together. It also aids skill development as they can watch how you hold your cutlery, lift your cup etc. You can model for them, and sitting side by side or opposite your child is a good way to do this.

Things to consider:

- **Stable base:** there's the seat depth, height from floor and height of child to the table to consider. A chair with a back rest provides more support than a stool.
- **Seat depth:** a cushion/pillow placed between your child and the back of the chair reduces the seat depth so they can sit comfortably without the chair cutting into the back of their legs.
- **Height from floor:** most chairs are designed for adult length legs. A stool, upturned storage box, or a cardboard box stuffed with paper can be used for your child to rest their feet on. You can also use a chair with a bar they can rest their feet on, or a child's dining height chair.
- **Height of child to the table:** A cushion under their bottom (or even a pile of books) is the first thing to try. A child's height dining chair ensures they are the right height to the table and have something to rest their feet on. There are different ones on the market.

If sitting at the table together is not an option, a child height table and chair again gives your child a stable balanced position to work from. This can be a nice option when there are a few children of similar size in a family and can eat together, again enjoying the social aspect of mealtimes.

If you tend to sit on the sofa or floor to eat it's also important to consider a stable position, and how easy it is to manoeuvre crockery and utensils. Ensure there is enough space around your child so they don't get bumped when eating.

- **Use a lap tray** – with a non-slip mat if necessary. A DIY version is a tray on a cushion or bean bag.

- **Sitting on floor** – ensure your child can rest their back against something for stability. Sitting cross legged or with their legs straight out and again using a lap tray can help.
- **Movement breaks:** Some children find it hard to sit for a whole meal – movement breaks are important. Have them help clear things away between courses, get up to get drinks etc. as a way of providing this.
- **Place mats:** using place mats or a table cloth protects your table from mess but also stops plates from sliding. This means your child can focus more on cutting or scooping their food than trying to keep the plate still. Choose ones with cork or non-slip backing.
- **Cutlery size:** children need changing sizes of cutlery as they grow. The style of handle can also make it easier to grasp and more comfortable to use.
- **Type of crockery:** we often give children plastic cups and plates in case they drop them. Sometimes using a heavier item makes us more aware it is there and actually less likely to drop it. A heavier plate will stay still more easily, aiding cutting. A pasta bowl or a plate with an indent helps keep food on the plate more easily. Plates with a contrasting colour e.g. white and not patterned where the food goes can make it easier to see what you are eating. A pattern at the bottom of the bowl however can be a motivator for young children to clear their plate.
- **Drinking cups:** We often give children plastic cups in case they drop them. Sometimes using a heavier item makes us more aware it is there and actually less likely to drop it. A glass tumbler which is straight up and down can be easier to handle and less likely to tip if knocked against. You can mark the child's drinking cup with a marker or use a pattern as a guide to how far to fill it.
- **Access:** Having condiments, shared dishes of food encourages experimenting. Have these within reach of everyone. A 'lazy Susan' is fun for children to use and makes this easier.

