

SELF-CARE EATING MEALS

USING A FORK INFORMATION SHEET

Mealtimes are an important aspect of family life. Children begin to develop self-feeding skills from birth. Self-feeding is a very complex task and it is common for children to have difficulty using cutlery to feed themselves. It usually takes until a child is 7 years old before they can successfully use cutlery to feed themselves without being too messy.



Babies are usually keen to get involved with feeding between 6 and 9 months. Between 9 and 13 months they can finger feed with soft foods or those that melt quickly in the mouth. By 24 months children are usually keen to feed themselves and be independent. Between 2 and 3 years children further develop their spoon feeding skills as well as learning to use a fork to stab. By 5 years a child is learning to spread and cut with a knife. It is often not until they are around 7 years of age that a child can use a knife and fork together to cut up food and are truly independent with self-feeding.

HINTS AND TIPS

- It is important that your child is well supported when they are learning any new skill. Whenever possible ensure that your child is sitting at a table or supported in a high chair.
- It is important that their feet and back are supported so that they can use their hands freely. You could use a sturdy box under their feet and cushions on the chair to make sure they are well supported.
- Always set the dishes and utensils out in the same way to develop a routine and help your child locate items at each meal.
- Think about the utensils you are using. Forks with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. A fork with a short handle is easier to control. Use a bowl or plate with a raised edge so the child has something to scoop against. Place a non-slip mat underneath the bowl or plate to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to scoop or stab.
- Work on one aspect of using a fork at a time e.g. scooping or stabbing.
- When your child is learning to scoop with a fork use foods that stick to the fork (e.g. yoghurt, porridge, mashed potato). These are less likely to spill, so the child has more chance of succeeding.
- When your child is learning to stab with a fork use soft foods that don't disintegrate.



- Take your time and be consistent. Learning a new skill takes time so persevere with giving support until you feel that the child is making progress.
- A good way to teach your child a new skills, is to break down each task into small steps and teach them the last step first (backward chaining). Once they can do the last step of the task, teach them the second-last step, then the third-last step and so on.
 - For example when learning to stab with a fork the adult could stab the food and let the child take the fork to their mouth and remove the food (two steps together as your child has probably already mastered taking cutlery to their mouth and removing the food).
 - Or when learning to scoop with a fork the adult would scoop the food and the child would take the spoon/fork to their mouth and remove the food.
- Children learn in different ways so you might need to vary your approach. There are a number of ways in which you can help;
 - Physically assist your child (see below for more details).
 - Show your child – do the task alongside your child.
 - Tell your child - talk your child through each step of the process.

You can use each of these ways individually or any combination depending on what suits your child. Please be aware that some children cannot look and listen at the same time so limit the amount of information you giving.

Ways to physically assist your Child using a Fork

- The child can hold onto the feeder's hand as the fork is brought to their mouth.
- The feeder holds the fork in the child's palm with their thumb and places their fingers on the back of the wrist.
- Hand-over-hand – the child grasps the fork while the feeder puts their hand over the top of the child's.
- The child grasps the fork and the feeder holds the end to guide the movement.
- The child grasps the fork while the feeder helps the child by supporting and guiding from the elbow.
- You can also practice using a fork during other activities e.g. when playing with play dough or during craft activities.

