

SELF-CARE EATING MEALS

USING A KNIFE 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.
- 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. Knives with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. A knife with a short handle is easier to control. Use a plate with a raised edge to prevent the food from sliding off the plate. Place a non-slip mat underneath the plate to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to spread or cut.



- Encourage a good cutlery grasp right from the start; your child's index finger should point down the back of the knife towards the blade.
- Encourage your child to hold the item being spread or cut with their non-dominant hand to keep it still.

- Work on one aspect of using a knife at a time e.g. spreading or chopping.

- Start off with soft spreads and firm foods when spreading. Spreading very soft butter or jam onto toast and spreading runny icing onto fairy cakes etc. As they become more proficient at this start to use spreads with firmer consistencies such as peanut butter or Nutella.



- Start off with chopping soft foods and move to firmer foods. For example practice chopping mushrooms and bananas before moving onto apples and potatoes.



- 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.

- 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 knife

- The child can hold onto the helper's hand as the knife is used to saw the food.
- Hand-over-hand – the child grasps the knife while the helper puts their hand over the top of the child's.
- The child grasps the knife and the helper holds the end to guide the movement.
- The child grasps the knife while the helper helps the child by supporting and guiding from the elbow.
- You can also practice using a knife during other activities e.g. when playing with play dough or during craft activities.

