

SELF-CARE EATING MEALS

USING A KNIFE AND 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.
- 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 and forks with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. Knives and forks with short handles are 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 cut.



- Encourage a good cutlery grasp right from the start; your child's index finger should point down the back of the knife and fork towards the blade and prongs.
- It is usually easier to use the fork in your non-dominant hand and your knife in your dominant hand but allow your child to experiment and find out what works best for them.



- Start off with cutting soft foods and move to firmer foods. For example practice cutting mushrooms and bananas before moving onto meat.
- 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.
- Practice, practice, practice! Give your child opportunities to practice every day. You may want to vary the time of day when you practice so practice at snack time. If your child is exceptionally hungry you may want to cut up some of their food so they can practice once they have satisfied their initial hunger.



A good way to teach your child a new skills, is to break down each task into small steps and teach them one step at a time (chaining). Teach them the first step and then teach the second step and so on until your child has mastered all of the steps. For cutting with a knife and fork the following steps may be appropriate. Use these steps along with the different helping techniques below:

- Get your child to stab the food and keep it still while you cut with the knife.
- Get your child to stab the food and saw with the knife.
- 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 and fork

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

