

Meal times

Mealtimes are an essential part of family life. Self-feeding is a skill that is developed from an early age. This can be a complex task for some children to develop and its quite common for children to have difficulties in self feeding and cutlery skills. It can take until a child is 7 years old before they can efficiently and effectively feed themselves without being too messy.

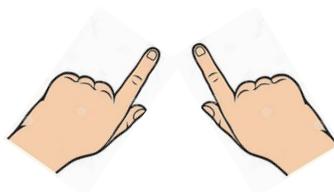
Things to consider

- Consider where your child sits to eat, ensuring they have sufficient support while seated at the table to allow them to use their hands efficiently.
- The best position: sit up, with bottom back in the chair, feet flat on the floor and the table at about elbow height. This will ensure your child is safely stable to use their cutlery
- Establish a routine for mealtimes
- Create a structured environment, minimising distractions
- Allow plenty of time
- Encourage your child to help prepare the meal
- Use visual cues
- Give responsibility (e.g. setting the table, clearing the table)

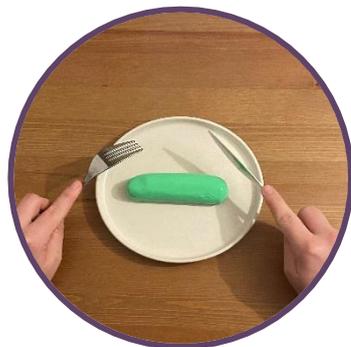
Equipment

- Think about the utensils you are using. Spoons or forks with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold. Such as Caring Cutlery which is moulded plastic handled cutlery with indents to guide where to place the index fingers. (pictured below)
- Place a non-slip mat underneath the bowl or plate to prevent it sliding when your child is learning to use cutlery (i.e Dycem)
- Plates with rims can be helpful in stopping food slipping off the plate





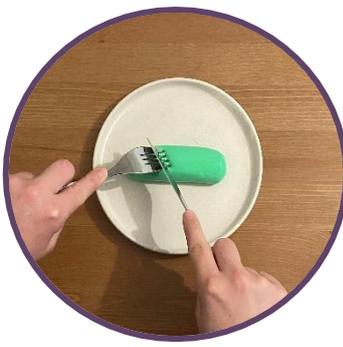
Using a knife and fork



position pointer fingers



Stab with fork



Kiss



Saw

Using a knife and fork together is a complex skill as each hand does a different action but must coordinate together. Highlight the different actions of each hand. Hold knife in your 'writing' hand and fork in the other hand.

- Encourage your child to hold the knife in the hand they use to write, as this will give more control.
- Holding the knife and fork so that the pointy fingers are pointing down the cutlery.
- The child should be encouraged to keep their index fingers straight on the knife / fork to produce a stable grasp.
- **'Stab'** the food with the fork.
- Place the blade of the knife against the back of the fork. Some children find it useful to refer to this stage as "**kiss**" as the knife "**kisses**" the fork.
- Move the hand that holds the knife back and forth to create a "**sawing**" motion. The child should maintain constant contact between the knife and fork, to avoid food slipping off the plate.
- Remind the child to verbalise **'Stab'**, **'Kiss'** and **'Saw'** when using the cutlery, to provide an additional verbal and auditory prompt about the movement required for the knife and fork and the order to use them.
- During play give opportunities e.g. practice chopping and cutting skills using playdough, putty.
- Practising on softer food initially for example boiled potatoes, bananas.
- Allow plenty of time during mealtimes to encourage your child to use cutlery, it takes time to learn a new skill, giving support until you feel your child is making progress.



Using various approaches:

- Hand over hand approach where the adult is physically assisting the child
- Doing the task alongside your child
- Talking through each step of the process
- Breaking down each task into small steps and teach them the last step first. Once they can do the last step of the task, teach them the second-last step, then the third-last step and so on.



Textures and sensation

Eating is an experience which involves all our senses. It is important to understand that we all process sensory information differently, many factors come into play with food; the look, smell, texture, taste, the noise it makes when we eat it. However, for some children, it is not necessarily the sensory element restricting their diet, and it is their dislike of change and preference for sameness.

[Find out more about fussy eating.](#)

Things to remember

- Children's dislike for certain foods can come from the consistency of certain foods for example a certain flavour / brand of crisps will always taste the same. When it comes to eating fruits / vegetables it not always consistent in taste, due to ripeness, particular variety of apple for example.

