

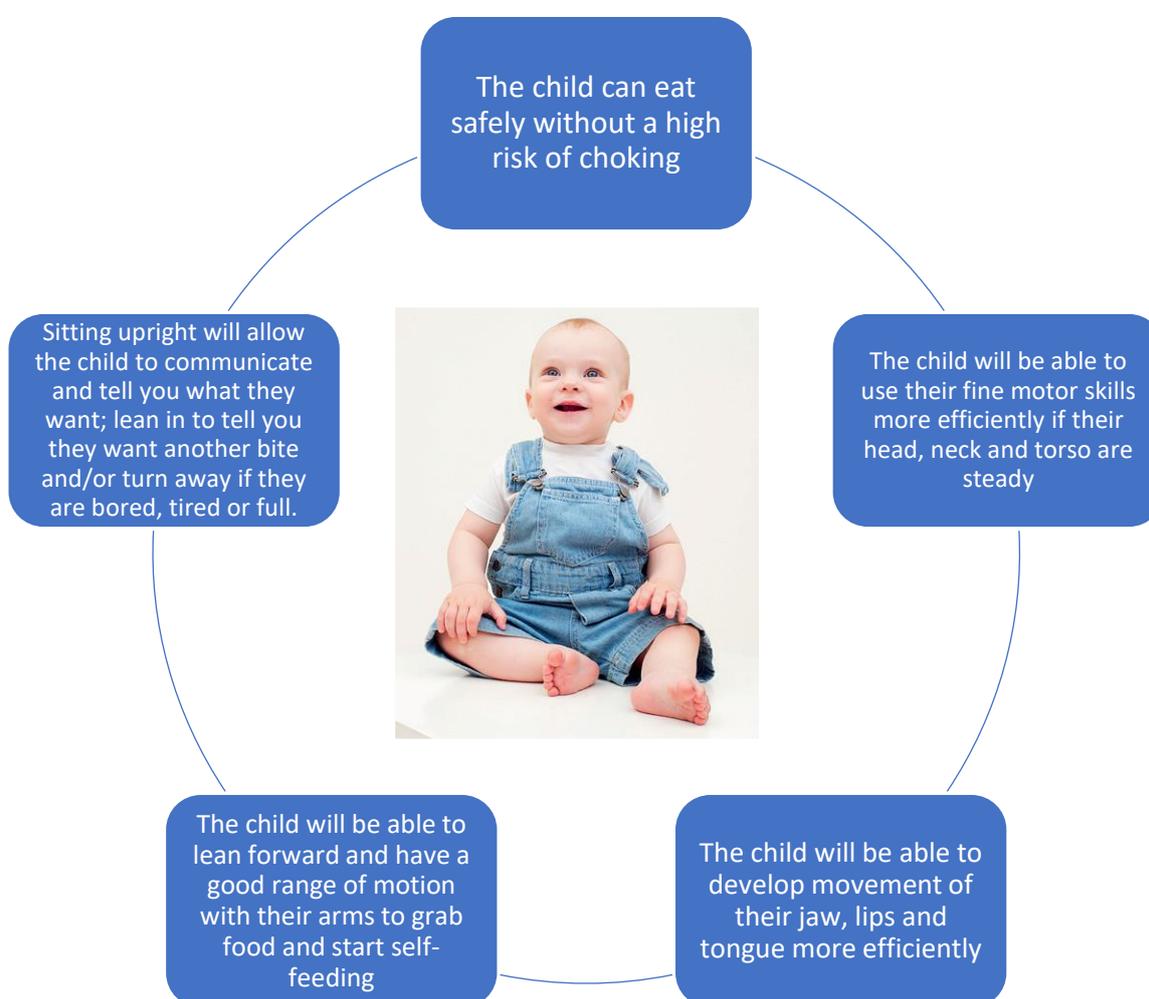
Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Promoting self-feeding skills

**SEATING AND POSITIONING:**

One of the readiness signs for starting to eat solid foods is that a child can sit up independently and hold their head up straight without tiring. This usually happens around 6- 9 months of age (however every child is different).

**Why is this a sign of readiness?**



### Methods of gaining the correct seating position:

- It is important that the **CHAIR** is a suitable size, to provide stability when eating:
  - Hips flexed at 90 degrees
  - Feet flat on floor (or footplate) and hip width apart.
  - Bottom and back supported.
  - Chair tucked in under the table.
  - Elbows supported on the table.
- Consider the properties of the **TABLE**:
  - Ensure that the child is sitting close to the table.
  - Ensure that the table is at the right height so that the elbows rest comfortably on the table.
  - Keep the table space clear from clutter. This will encourage the child to concentrate on the task in hand.
- Work out a simple physical reminder such as a slight stroke down the back or tap on the shoulder when posture is poor.
- If the child is leaning backwards in the chair, try to reposition the child at the hips so that they are leaning slightly forward, just like you would lean when eating your food. This places the trunk into an ideal upright position with the shoulders directly over the hips. “If you get the hips, you get the lips”.
- If children are in specialist seating, ensure that they are firmly held in the chair with the lap and chest straps and if they have a waistcoat on make sure it is reasonably tight fitting over their shoulders.

It is very important for children's feet to be supported while sitting to eat. This can either be a built-in footrest, or you can create your own attaching a tea-towel to the chair. This will provide core stability and a feeling of comfort while eating.



## SELF-FEEDING STAGES

Below is a table with a *guide* demonstrating what level of self-feeding skills a child should be at, and at what age. These ages are a guide only but can help determine a young child's readiness for eating and drinking independently.

For children who have extra needs, the developmental stages may be more of help to you. If your child is picking up food in their hands and using a pincer grasp, developmentally, they will not be able to jump to using a fork straight away! Try and work up to using a fork by following the developmental stages.

9 Months	Holds, bites, and chews a biscuit. Puts hands around bottle or cup when drinking
12 Months	Picks up small crumbs, raisins with pincer grip Holds spoon but cannot yet use by themselves
15 Months	Holds spoon, brings to mouth and licks, but usually cannot prevent it from tipping over. Holds and drinks from cup when adult holds cup and tips it back for them.
18 Months	Holds spoon, gets food safely to mouth, chews well. Holds cup between both hands, drinks without much spillage, but maybe unable to place safely back on table.
2 years	Spoon feeds without spilling, chews competently Lifts cup and replaces on table without spilling Asks for food and drink
2 ½ years	Eats skilfully with a spoon and may start to use a fork
3 years	Eats independently with a fork and spoon
4 years	Eats skilfully with a fork and spoon
5 years	Uses fork competently, and beginning to use knife for cutting, but may still need help with tougher textures such as meat.

## **Before Age 1 / First stage of self-feeding:**

Once solid foods are introduced, the child may show signs of wanting to self-feed e.g., start reaching for food on your plate and/or reach for the spoon. It is great to encourage this, even though it may be messy and sometimes frustrating.

**Finger foods:** are soft, bite-sized pieces of food that are easy for a child to pick up and mash between their gums or teeth.

When a child is learning to feed themselves, do not expect every mouthful to be a success so be prepared for a mess! Messy play with food can teach a child many skills, without the food ever reaching their mouth;



### **ORAL MOTOR SKILLS**

Licking, sucking, moving the tongue



### **FINE MOTOR SKILLS**

Palmer and pincer grasp, hand strength, finger isolation



**MESSY SELF-FEEDING TEACHES ME..**



### **HOW FOOD LOOKS AND SMELLS**



### **TACTILE/TEXTURES**

soft, wet, crunchy, cold, warm



### **HAND EYE COORDINATION**

reaching for food, bringing it to the mouth

A good way to start is to place a few pieces of food in front of the child. Let them feel it. It may seem as though the child is just playing with the food, however, this is how the child learns. Initially the child may use a raking motion with their hand to grasp the food, however over time they will develop more precise fine motor skills such as picking up food with their thumb and fore-finger; the pincer grasp.

Setting aside time at the start of the meal for practicing self-feeding is a good idea, as the child's desire to eat will be stronger and may help in motivating them to bring the food to their mouth themselves.



## **Self-Feeding:**

### **18 months to 24 months:**

After a baby masters self-feeding with their hands, the next step is offering **UTENSILS**. This will still be a messy process!

Just as a child needs lots of practice eating with their hands, they will also need many opportunities to attempt to eat with utensils.



### **Steps to follow:**

1. Give the child their own “baby spoon” or toddler-friendly spoon or fork.
2. Encourage the child to bring food from the bowl to their mouth by placing your hand on top of theirs, guiding the utensil towards the food and then jointly moving it towards their mouth.
3. Start with foods, which are easy to scoop up. This includes those which stick easily to the spoon such as yoghurt, custard, porridge, mashed and sticky foods.
4. Once the child has become used to dipping the utensil into the food and bringing it to the mouth, consider giving them a small bowl of their own. Allow them to feed themselves from their bowl while still feeding them from yours. If the child is demonstrating that they are getting most of the food in their mouth, you can slowly give them more in their bowl until they are eating most of the meal themselves.

### **Think about the spoon & bowl!**

- Spoons with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold.
- A spoon with a short handle is easier to control, reducing spillage.
- Use a bowl with a raised edge so the child has something to scoop against.
- Place a non-slip mat underneath the bowl to prevent it sliding when learning to scoop



### **Play activities to practice using utensils:**

- Shovelling sand or dried beans
- Using a spoon to scoop dried pasta
- Pouring water into containers
- Pouring in bathtub using stacking or measuring cup



## **Self-Feeding: 2 – 3 years old:**

At this stage, the child is getting good at using a spoon and can use it successfully, without spilling, most of the time.

Next step; using a fork!

When it comes to teaching a child how to use a fork, you want to start off with easy to poke foods such as cheese, cooked broccoli, tofu or chicken cubes, cubes of potato/sweet potato, soft boiled carrots etc.

### Steps to follow:

1. Give the child their own small fork and allow them to try to poke the food themselves.
2. If the child struggles, you can guide the fork by placing your hand on top of theirs and guiding the fork to “stab” the food. This will help the child gain a better understanding of how to use a fork. The child should then be able to bring the fork with the food on it to their mouth themselves, like they do with a spoon.

Again, these skills need to be practiced!

Create opportunities for your child to use a fork;

- Play with play dough; scooping, stabbing, cutting, mashing and pinching pieces.
- Using imaginary play to practise holding the fork correctly; imaginary tea parties or picnics and feeding teddies



### Pointy Fingers!

(for when the child is older and used to using a fork for easy fork foods)

Encourage the child to use their “pointy fingers” to hold cutlery correctly. This means placing their index finger at the neck of the fork/knife to give more control over the utensil. They can then wrap their thumb and fingers under the cutlery. You can put a visual mark on the cutlery to remind the child where to place their pointy finger – e.g. a sticker, a piece of coloured tape etc.

‘Kura Care Easy Grip’ cutlery also encourages this hand position.



## Self-Feeding:

### 4 – 5 years old:

At this stage, the child can use a spoon and a fork well, and they may be attempting to use a knife after watching siblings/parents do it.

Using a knife and fork; requires both hands doing different actions! One hand holding the food steady with the fork, and the other hand moving forward and back to cut the food.

- Top tip: Leave the fork down and practice using the knife on its own first!

Start with play-doh and a blunt play-knife. Make sausages and encourage the child to cut them up into small pieces safely. Then try cutting up soft foods which require little effort e.g. cooked carrots, bananas, pancakes, sausages etc. Allow your child to hold the food steady in one hand and cut with the other.



When the child has mastered the cutting forward and back motion, try and bring in the fork again! Steps to help:

1. The child can hold onto the adult's hands as they cut the food using the knife and fork
2. Hand-over-hand; the child grasps the knife and fork while the adult puts their hand over the top of the child's hands
3. The child grasps the knife and fork and the adult holds the end to guide the movement
4. The child grasps the knife and fork while the adult helps the child by supporting and guiding from the elbow.

### Other tips to remember:

- At mealtimes, do not expect the child to practice more than two or three cuts.
- As a general rule, the child should hold the knife in their dominant hand.
- Your child may find it useful to repeat the phrase "Hold still with the fork, backwards and forwards with the knife" as they cut up the food to remind them of what to do.
- If the child will accept physical help, stand behind them and help the hand with the fork in it to stay still whilst the knife moves back and forth across the food.
- Expect untidy cutting and some tearing of the food to continue initially.
- At first, child cuts up soft foods and you help cut tougher foods like meat. As the child's skills improve, encourage them to cut tougher foods e.g. they cut two pieces and then you help cut the rest. Slowly build up how much you expect them to do.