

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DEPARTMENT

Developing Independence with Eating



Using cutlery is a highly skilled task and some children may experience difficulties learning how to use a spoon, knife and fork. Here are some tips to help your child develop independence with eating.

Positioning:

- Ensure your child is at the correct height when they are sat at the table with their **feet resting on the floor or on a footstool** to enable them to maintain stability whilst eating. Ensure the **table is at elbow level** so their arms can rest on the surface.

Equipment:

- Cutlery with **thick** and **short handles** are easier to hold and control
- **Heavy cutlery** can make it easier to control and cut food
- Use of **adapted cutlery** can help to promote a good grasp and support finger positioning, whilst also increasing control and ability. For example, 'Junior **Caring cutlery**'.



- If food coming off the plate is a problem: use a **bowl/plate with raised edge** or a **scooped** bowl so the child can scoop against the side. **Plate guards** may also assist.
- If plate slipping on the table is a problem: try a **damp cloth under bowl/plate** to prevent it from slipping. **Non-slip matting** may also assist.



Together with you, in your local community

Practice:

- **Demonstrate** correct way to hold cutlery and **model** using cutlery. Use **clear** and consistent **language** when teaching.
- If child has difficulty knowing where to position fingers- **mark handles** or position a sticker in the appropriate place. Child's index fingers should point down back of fork and knife towards the tips. e.g. place dot on knife **where index finger should be placed**.
- Assist your child using **hand-over-hand technique** (child grasps fork and adult puts hand over top of the child's to physically guide them).
- **Start by practicing using cutlery away from mealtimes** and **make it fun** e.g. cutting play-dough, scooping water in the bath.
- **Use play-dough to practice before food**- turn play-dough into food shapes to cut and pick up e.g. sausages, cake.
- **Practice cutting** using a knife and fork with **soft foods first** e.g. boiled potato and grade up to tougher foods e.g. meats
- Start by cutting most of the food on child's plate and encourage child to complete the task by cutting the last few pieces to increase their confidence.

Using a knife and fork:

1. Encourage child to get their **pointing (index) fingers ready**
2. **Position index fingers correctly** on fork and knife (in grooves of adapted cutlery or on marked dot). Other fingers curl around the handle.
3. **Stab food with fork** to stabilise
4. Keep fork steady in food
5. **Saw 'back and forth' into food with knife**
6. Bring food to mouth using fork or put chopped food to side of plate (use knife to slide food off fork)
7. Repeat Steps 3-6



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