

Using Cutlery

Every family and child is unique and so are their mealtimes. The strategies below can be used however your family does mealtimes. If you want your child to be able to use cutlery you need to teach them how to do this. This is because using cutlery is a complex task. Learning to use cutlery will be messy and takes time.

Are they sitting comfortably?

It is important that your child is well positioned when they are learning any new skill. When they are little:

- Make sure your child is well supported in a high chair or on your lap.
- Use cushions or rolled up towels to help your child to stay sitting up straight in their high chair.



As they grow, it is important that their feet and back are supported so that they can use their hands freely. If they are sitting at a table on an adult sized chair:

- Use a step or sturdy box under their feet.
- Use cushions on the chair or behind their back to make sure they are well supported.
- They could kneel on the chair to help them reach the table better.



If they are sitting on the sofa using a lap tray might make it easier.

If they are sitting or kneeling at a low table having their back against the wall or another hard surface might help.

Routines can help

- Eating meals at the same time everyday can be helpful.
- Set the dishes and utensils out in the same way to help your child find what they need.

Which utensils should they use?

- Cutlery with thick and/or textured handles are easier to hold.
- Child-sized cutlery or cutlery with a short handle is easier to control.
- Sometimes heavier cutlery can be easier to control.
- Use a bowl or plate with a raised edge so the child has something to scoop against.
- Use a non-slip mat underneath the bowl or plate to stop it sliding around.



Practice and Play

- Take your time and be consistent. Learning a new skill takes time so persevere with giving support until you feel your child is making progress.
- Practice, practice, practice! Give your child opportunities for practice every day.
- Play with cutlery outside of mealtimes:
 - Try giving cutlery at bath time or as part of messy or pretend play.
 - As your child gets older make cutlery practice fun, you could have a race or practice cutting up foods you wouldn't normally cut.
 - Remember to supervise your child when they have cutlery so that they don't hurt themselves accidentally.
- Involve your child in simple kitchen tasks so that they can practice using cutlery in different ways too.

Teaching cutlery skills

- A good way to teach your child a new skill, is to break down each task into small steps and teach them the last step first (backward chaining). Once they can do the last step of the task, teach them the second-last step, then the third-last step and so on.
- Children learn in different ways so you might need to help in different ways.
 - Show your child - do the task beside your child.
 - Tell your child - talk your child through each step of the process.
 - Physically assist your child if your child is happy for you to do this.
 - Your child can put their hand over your hand.
 - You can hold the utensil in your child's palm with your thumb and put your fingers on the back of their wrist.
 - Hand-over-hand – the child grasps the spoon and you put your hand over the top. Some children don't like this so stop if your child shows any signs of distress.
 - Your child holds the cutlery and you holds the end to guide the movement.
 - Your child holds the cutlery while you help by supporting and guiding from the elbow.



You can use each of these ways individually or any combination depending on what suits your child. Remember that some children cannot look and listen at the same time. Let them watch or listen and then repeat so that they can do the other one.



- Think about the food you are using. Will it stick to the spoon rather than slide off, is it soft enough for your child to stab with a fork or cut with a knife?
- Encourage a good grasp right from the start:
 - Your child's index finger should point down the back of the fork towards the prongs.
 - Your child's index finger should point down the back of the knife towards the blade.
- Work on one thing at a time such as:
 - spreading or cutting with a knife
 - stabbing or scooping with a fork
 - holding and moving the top chopstick or holding and moving the bottom chopstick.
- When learning to use a fork or knife it can help to get your child to hold the food with their helping (non-dominant) hand to keep it still.
- When learning to use a knife and fork together it is usually easier to use the fork in your helping (non-dominant) hand and your knife in your doing (dominant) hand but let your child experiment and find out what works best for them.

