

USING A KNIFE AND FORK

There are many reasons why children find using cutlery difficult, including movement or learning difficulties. Lack of experience can also impact on their level of skill, for example a child who mainly has finger foods or whose parents cut the food up for them may not get the chance to practise and therefore develop cutlery skills.

Advice and strategies when introducing cutlery

- Expect messy eating when starting out. Practice feeding just before bath time and when time is not so pressured.
- Consider the size and shape of cutlery. Try using child size cutlery or cutlery with chunky handles for children who have a loose or weak grip.
- Make sure the bowl or plate is not slipping by using either a non-slip mat or a damp cloth underneath.
- Consider the child's sitting posture at the table; the chair should allow them to be high enough to adequately access the cutlery and their plate, and these should be placed on a table – see [Good seating](#) advice sheet.
- Make sure the table is a good height for the child so that they can prop their elbows at 90 degrees on the table.
- Try to eat with your child when you can so they have the opportunity to copy you.

Using a spoon

- Introduce a spoon between 9 and 12 months. Initially your child will play with it but eventually they will make an association between the utensil and eating.
- Self-feeding involves both finger feeding and feeding self with a spoon/fork. As young children practice holding the bottle to drink and then learn to sit and finger feed, they are preparing for the next step- spoon feeding.
- Present the spoon in play to your child. While you are feeding them, encourage them to have their own spoon to hold. They will hold it, bang it, and mouth it and if food happens to be on the spoon and survives the shaking, banging or tapping, the child may get a taste while mouthing the spoon.
- Putting sticky foods e.g. honey, jam, peanut butter, mashed potato and colourful purees onto the spoon will increase the chance of the food still being on the spoon when it arrives at the child's mouth. This 'reward' of the taste of the food, will encourage the child to try to lift the spoon to their mouth again.

- A bowl or plate with a raised edge can give child something to scoop against, helping to get food on to the spoon and keeping the food contained in the bowl.
- Short and wide spoon handles can help increase control.
- A wider bowl may be easier for a child to use with limited wrist control.
- The spoon can be flat or deep. The flat spoon makes it easier for the child to use the upper lip to remove the food. With a deeper spoon, the food does not fall off the spoon so easily and may be better for a self-feeder.
- Spoon handles that are bent can be easier for children to use to guide the spoon to the mouth.
- When your child is happy to hold the spoon and place it in their mouth, help to guide them in holding the loaded spoon. Assist them by supporting either at the elbow, if they can hold the spoon, or by using your hand over theirs to feel the movements they need to make. Gradually aim to give less and less help. They may need you to place the spoon in their hand to make the correct grip at this stage.
- Allow your child to finish off what's left in the bowl to practise self-feeding if you do not want all the food spilled.

Using an open cup

- Start by using a cup with two handles to help your child hold the cup steady.
- After this you can progress to a one handled cup and then on to the child holding a beaker using both hands.
- To help your child make a good lip seal around the cup, practise using thickened liquids like smoothies, milkshakes or yoghurt drinks to give them more time to get organised.
- Only fill the cup half way up or less to reduce spillage.
- Try to offer less and less help and gradually allow your child to hold and bring the cup to their mouth and then tip it to drink from it.
- Encourage your child to sit still so that they have the best control of their arms and their body to make a slow and graded movement when tipping the cup to drink from it.
- Some children like cups they can see into or cups that are tilted to reduce how far they have to tip their heads back e.g. Flexi cups or Doidy cups.

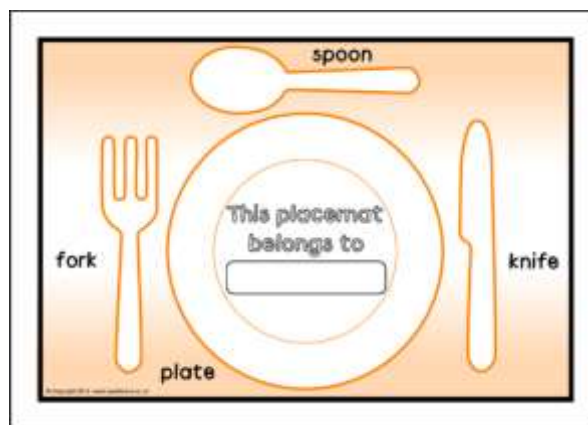
Using a fork

- Once your child can use a spoon, you can introduce a fork at mealtimes.

- Offer your child a child size, easy grip fork at first.
- Let the child practise initially taking foods off the fork you have loaded for them, then progress to foods that are easy for them to stab like fruit or cooked vegetables.
- Eventually offer the spoon and fork together at mealtimes to let them practise holding two pieces of cutlery at the same time. Encourage them to hold the fork in the non-dominant hand.

Using a knife and fork together

- Place the knife and fork in front of your child - you may find a personalised place mat, like the one below, useful. Non slip matting such as Dycem may also help to stabilise the plate.



- Ideally, the knife should be held in your child's dominant hand as the 'sawing' action requires the most skill. However, some children hold their fork in their dominant hand (as this is what they have been used to when not using a knife and may find swapping difficult) and this is fine as long as they are consistent with this.
- Encourage your child to hold the knife and fork in a functional grip with their fingers positioned securely along the shaft of the cutlery – pointy finger pointing down. You may need to use a spot on the cutlery for placing fingers in a comfortable and functional position.
- Take a photograph of the child holding the knife and fork correctly and use it as a visual prompt at the table during meal times.

Advice and strategies to help practicing using knife and fork

- Initially, use soft foods that are easier to cut, e.g. fish fingers, cooked carrots and then increase the size/hardness of vegetables to develop skills.
- Develop a consistent routine for mealtimes.

- Reduce distractions (such as the television) during mealtimes.
- Use other children and adults in the house as examples of good use of cutlery.
- Provide hand over hand assistance until your child can undertake the task independently but whenever possible try and encourage the child to do things for themselves.
- Use a knife with a serrated edge such as a steak knife to make cutting easier.
- Blu tac around the handles can provide a better grip and a guide as to where to place fingers.
- Try not to be concerned about mess, all children are messy to begin with.
- Consider reward charts for monitoring success and encouraging independence and participation in the task.
- Practice away from mealtimes using playdough.

