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Guidelines for the Development of Self-Feeding Skills

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Self-care skills are the basic tasks we perform every day. Self-care skills are also known as Activities of Daily Living (ADLs). The self-care skills children learn early on are self-feeding, dressing, bathing, and grooming. This handout will give a basic guideline for the development of self-feeding skills.

Self-feeding provides a fun and easy way for a child to explore different sensory experiences. This is a great opportunity for the child to play with and feel crumbly, rough, wet, squishy, spongy, and slippery textures. Foods also provide different sounds, smells, and tastes. Self-feeding can be messy, but being allowed to be messy will help a child gain confidence, become comfortable with different textures, and develop strength and coordination in the hands and fingers.

In addition, using forks, spoons, and cups are some of the earliest opportunities for a child to learn how to use tools. Learning to use tools is important as the child grows and starts to draw with crayons, write with pencils, and cut with scissors.

A child who is practicing and learning self-feeding skills is also improving:



- Strength in his/her core, back, arms, and hands
- Use of both arms and hands together
- Coordination in his/her arms and hands
- Eye-hand coordination



Drinking From a Bottle/Cup

Age	Milestone
2 to 4 months 	• Moves hand/hands up to the bottle/breast while feeding
6 to 9 months 	• Holds a bottle with both hands • Uses a cup with help
12 to 15 months 	• Holds a cup with both hands • Takes a few sips without help
15 to 18 months 	• Uses a straw
2 to 3 years 	• Drinks from a cup (no lid) without spilling



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(cont.)

Self-Feeding	
Age	Milestone
6 to 9 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of purees and soft solids (<i>A baby's diet should consist of only breast milk or formula for the first six months.</i>) • Wants to help with feeding • Starts holding and mouthing large crackers/cookies • Plays with spoon; grabs/bangs spoon; puts both ends in mouth
9 to 13 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finger feeds soft foods and foods that melt quickly • Enjoys finger feeding
12 to 14 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dips spoon in food • Moves spoon to mouth but is messy and spills
15 to 18 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scoops food with a spoon and feeds self
18 to 24 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants to feed himself/herself
2 to 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabs food with fork • Uses spoon without spilling
3 to 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eats by himself/herself

Children with impaired motor skills and/or developmental disabilities may have a harder time learning these skills. Let the child's abilities guide the speed they acquire self-feeding skills and gradually progress from the simpler skills to more complex ones.

Games / Activities

Imitation and play can also help children develop self-feeding skills. Include the following games/activities into your child's day to help your child learn to feed himself/herself.

- Scoop and pour water in the bathtub using stacking or measuring cups.
- Use a spoon to scoop marshmallows.
- Use scoops and shovels in a sandbox.
- Put small objects through holes into containers (also known as "posting").
- Play with play dough—scooping, stabbing, cutting, and pinching pieces.
- Pretend to feed a baby doll.
- Have imaginary tea parties, picnics, or meals.



Related Handy Handouts®:

- [570 – The Development of Infant Feeding and Swallowing](#)
- [170 – Reaching Developmental Milestones of Self-Care and Independence](#)
- [145 – Fine Motor Milestones](#)

Resource:

Case-Smith, J. (2005). Occupational therapy for children: Fifth edition. St. Louis: Elsevier Inc.

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