



### Key Points – Time – Practice - Encouragement

When building independent feeding skills it is important to remember the typical developmental stages of self-feeding.

Encourage children to practice feeding themselves, beginning with finger foods and progressing to spoon and fork.

Give children plenty of time to practice and let them be as independent as possible during mealtimes.

Give them the tools they need to be successful. Consider bowls that attach to the table, child-sized utensils and small cups with handles and spouts (such as measuring cups) for pouring.

Encourage children to try for themselves but provide help and encouragement when needed so they don't get frustrated.

Consult with occupational, physical, speech/language therapists about students who need specialized materials and/or instructional strategies.



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

- Strength in his/her back, arms, and hands
- Coordination in his/her arms and hands
- Grasping patterns
- Refining sensory processing skills
- Oral motor skills
- Overall independence

Learning self-feeding skills is a **multi-sensory experience**, so do not be surprised if children become messy. Provide opportunities through the daily routine to engage in hands-on and "messy" play. Explain to children during mealtime that "messy" is for playing at sensory table, not for food.

**Get children involved** with food through stories, books, photos. Cut food into different shapes. Model by tasting foods yourself and discuss the foods.

**Provide assistance** as needed but keep in mind the **prompting** level so that you do not over-help. For example: Help a child grasp the spoon and get food on the spoon and then let the child guide the spoon to mouth independently if possible.

Don't worry about messy faces and hands while the child is practicing self-feeding. Focus on cleaning hands and face after the child has finished eating.

## Strategies for incorporating feeding skills into daily routines:

- Let your students practice taking tops off of different kinds of containers. Put some favorite toys in plastic boxes or jars. If they have difficulty, allow them to finish opening the containers. Gradually close the lids on the containers more and more. Finally let them try to lift the lids without assistance.
- Let your students try to remove the pull-tab tops on containers such as pudding or gelatin. Initially, pull the lid part-way off. Gradually let them do more and more of the task.
- Save bottles when you empty them. Lay out a group of empty bottles on the table. Put the lids in a separate pile. Let the students find the correct lids for the bottles and put them on. You can have a race to see who can finish putting tops on the most bottles.  
Matching and sorting by shapes and sizes is also a good activity for practicing visual discrimination.
- Encourage your students to feed themselves by helping with hand-over-hand as you scoop. Start easing your grip until the child is scooping all by himself/herself.
- Encourage students to practice drinking from a straw and sip-cup. Put small amounts of liquid in the cup to start. Use a small cup that has a wide steady base. Expect some spills but realize that the effort to develop independence is important, even if additional time is needed.
- Incorporate skills such as hand-washing before meals and snacks and cleaning up afterwards into feeding routines.
- ***Incorporate language and communication skills***
  - Label the foods, utensils
  - Label the child's feeling about the food and meal time process. ( wow, yuck, yum, mmm, in, out, all done, more) and also add a gesture if needed
  - Describe the food (hot, cold, sweet, sticky, crunchy).
  - Provide prompts and communication boards to encourage the child to request and comment about foods.
  - Provide choices
- ***Incorporate feeding skills into play***
  - Nesting toys of different sizes with various items for pouring, filling, emptying (examples: water, rice, sand)
  - Play dough for scooping, spearing, cutting
  - Pretend to feed a doll
  - Pretend to have a tea party or pizza party in the dramatic play center
- ***Incorporate fine-motor and sensory practice:***
  - Use spoons to scoop small marshmallows
  - Spread frosting or peanut butter onto crackers
  - Cut waffles along the grid lines

### References:

Florida Department of Education. Division of Early Learning. Florida Early Learning and DevelopmentalStandards 2017. <https://flbt5.floridaearlylearning.com/standards.html>

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI). Resources for "Practical Strategies" and "UsingVisuals." Department of Education, Office of Special Programs. (nd).

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