

## Creating Mealtime Independence for Children with Autism

Author: Samira Amiri, Occupational Therapist Assistant at Hillingdon Manor School



### Introduction

Being able to manage to eat and drink independently and neatly is an important aspect of social acceptance. Common issues affecting eating and drinking include oral motor control such as chewing and swallowing and requires specialist assessment. Sensory processing difficulties can also affect eating and drinking due to a child having specific preferences to food textures, temperature and taste. In certain cases of food sensitivity and allergies, consultation with a paediatrician, dietitian or nutritionist may be required.

This help sheet focusses on the practical problems of managing eating and drinking, using utensils and independence during mealtimes for children with autism.

### Individual development

When teaching skills, Occupational Therapist's assess and follow the developmental sequence in which children usually acquire these skills and apply this information to individual children. Consideration is given to when a child may be ready to learn new

skills according to their motivation, learning ability and skills. For example a child aged two is typically able to feed themselves using a spoon but this will be compromised in a child with a motor skills difficulty. Every child develops and progresses at their own rate. This help sheet addresses a number of skill areas to consider in a developmental order for example, a child is unlikely to be able to cut with a knife if they are not able to use a fork.

### Positioning

It is important for your child to be seated on a suitable chair and at a table that is of an appropriate height. A correct seated posture will assist your child to be more able to use their arms functionally and is particularly important if they are learning to use both hands together. Ensure their feet are flat on the floor or they have a footrest. The table height should be approximately the height of their elbows. A supportive chair will ensure your child is not worried about falling or having to concentrate on sitting skills.

## Sitting at the table

Some children might need a little physical activity before they are asked to sit at a table. A timer could be set to show more concretely that sitting is expected at mealtime, or at least for a few minutes until the timer rings. The length of time a child is expected to sit may be gradually lengthened so success is built up slowly. It helps if the expectation to sit and eat at the table can be structured in small steps and is paced.

Some children can sit and eat quickly at the table but will not be able to sit and wait for others before being served and/or after they have finished their food. This inability to wait can sometimes be addressed with special waiting toys or activities. Sometimes items to focus on while waiting are helpful. Even some older children and adults on the autism spectrum have a need to develop waiting strategies to use at mealtime while eating with others. In this situation, bringing something to read or a pocket sized game to focus on while waiting is a positive coping strategy for older children.

## Learning to drink from a cup and teaching your child to hold a cup with one hand

Ensure your child is sat securely, use small short plastic cups that are easy to hold and don't require their head to tilt back, fill the cup up and give support to the child in tilting the cup. Sometimes thicker drinks are easier to learn to sip such as milk shakes or smoothies.

Once your child is ready to learn to hold the cup, fill the cup part of the way and use small cups. When you progress to teaching your child to hold a cup with one hand, it helps to provide a narrow cup that is easy to grasp, has one handle or a weighted bottom.

## Finger feeding

Offer bite sized foods with one finger food item at each meal. Offer only a few pieces at a time. If your child has difficulty picking up pieces, make the pieces larger in size. Allow your child to self-feed with their fingers first, before introducing utensils.

## Learning to use a spoon

Initially, give opportunities to play with a spoon during feeding. When you are ready to introduce a spoon, be prepared for a mess! This can be an opportunity

to have fun with your child. Provide opportunities to use spoons during play in the sand pit. Use pots and pans with raisins or dried pasta for example and allow your child to practice stirring and loading the spoon and putting it in/out of pots, onto plates or in pretend play feeding a doll/teddy.

Initially you can try handing a loaded spoon to the child to take to their mouth. If they are able to grasp it, support their forearm and guide it towards their mouth. If your child has difficulties grasping the spoon then try larger barrelled or rounded handles. Foam gripping can be added onto the barrel or specialist adapted cutlery is available (see suppliers opposite).

When learning to load the spoon, use food that is more likely to stick to it such as mashed potatoes, yoghurt or rice pudding.

Use bowls with high sides or a pot to assist with loading.

You can also use hand-over-hand to help your child learn a scooping action.

Practice at the beginning of the meal when your child is most hungry and more motivated.

If your child loses concentration/interest easily, have the spoon yourself and alternate between your child feeding themselves and you giving a spoonful.

A suction bottom or Dycem mat placed under the bowl will help keep the bowl in position and stop it from slipping.

Try the hand-over-hand technique, placing your hands over the child's throughout feeding.

Always make sure you are consistent with your language, for instance, 'scoop'.

## Learning to use a fork

As with the spoon, if there is a problem with holding the fork, use adapted cutlery. A therapist can advise you on different handles and grips.

Once the child has mastered using a spoon, they can progress to learning how to use a fork.

Begin using a plastic bowl, then progress to using a plate.

A suction bottom or Dycem mat placed under the bowl will help keep the bowl in position and stop it from slipping.

Use foods that are easier to pick up and can be cut into larger pieces, for example chicken and sausages. Avoid foods that will fall apart, such as boiled potatoes.

## Learning to use a knife

In play, give opportunities to use cutlery to cut play-doh or playdoh and use toys from the Early Learning Centre such as pieces of fruit and sandwich sets that use velcro.

Allow your child to help with simple food preparation, e.g. cut up a banana for a fruit salad. Start with soft foods that your child can push a knife through such as boiled potatoes then move on to teaching to cut foods that require a slicing action, such as soft meats.

It is important to make sure you are consistent with language such as 'slice'.

## Using a knife and fork together

This is a complex skill as each hand does a different action and must co-ordinate together. The fork holds the food still and the knife cuts through.

Your child also needs to learn to move the food using their cutlery into position on the plate so it is in the easiest position to cut. This again is best practised and explained initially using something such as a slice of bread, then helped and shown how during the mealtime.

A serrated knife can be better for cutting foods but consider safety first.

If your child is right handed, ensure the knife is grasped in their right hand. Be mindful of teaching your child according to your own dominance which could be different to theirs.

## Keeping the plate still

It is advised to use non-slip Dycem mats to prevent the plate slipping and a plate or bowl with a lip makes scooping easier.

## Carrying a lunch tray

When your child first carries a tray, try short distances and start with items that won't break/overflow and make a mess such as a sandwich on a plate. It is also important to ensure the tray has handles.

## Additional supports

- You could use a visual schedule of the steps involved.
- A reward chart for independent completion of tasks (or attempt at, in the early stages) is also helpful.
- Routine: Use the same routine or strategy each time you complete the same task to help learning.
- Consistency: Be consistent with the words and signs used to assist your child and keep instructions short and simple.
- Motivation: Start with food or drinks that your child really likes to increase motivation.
- Support: Work from behind your child when assisting them or showing them how to do something so that your hands and their hands are moving together in the same direction.

## Suppliers

- Non-slips mats to prevent plate movement - <http://ow.ly/NPAh30InF2u>
- Plates with built up edges to increase independence in scooping food - <http://ow.ly/LOQM30InF3U>
- Caring cutlery with shaped handles and grooves for finger placement - <http://ow.ly/yUtl30InF5Q>
- Height adjustable chair with footrest - <http://ow.ly/4act30InF7F>

## Spread the word...

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our clinical team. If you would like us to cover any particular subjects around autism in future editions then please let us know by emailing [info@optionsautism.co.uk](mailto:info@optionsautism.co.uk)

The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website [www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources](http://www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources)