



SECTION 1.8: SELF-FEEDING BASICS

WHAT IS SELF-FEEDING?



Self-feeding is when children feed themselves using their own fingers, utensils and cups. It is the process of setting up, arranging and bringing food and liquid from a plate, bowl or cup to their mouth. Self-feeding using the fingers typically begins around 6-7 months old when children start eating solid foods and show a growing interest in trying foods using their hands. By 12-14 months old, children take on more of an active role using spoons and cups on their own to feed themselves. Regardless of the method for self-feeding, when offered these experiences at the right time in life, children can learn these vital lifelong skills.




WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-FEEDING?

Learning to self-feed is an exciting and motivating time in a child's life. It's also an important skill that positively impacts many aspects of a child's development.

Self-feeding is important because:

- ① Children experience new sensations including different textures and temperatures.
- ② It helps develop important skills such as using the fingers and hands for complex movements.
- ③ It builds feelings of independence and confidence for children.
- ④ It helps children understand their own feelings of hunger and fullness.
- ⑤ It is a fun and rewarding experience for children and caregivers.

BENEFITS OF SELF-FEEDING	DESCRIPTIONS (WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE)
<p>Fine Motor Skills</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaches children how to use their fingers and hands for grasping and releasing foods, utensils and cups ○ Teaches children how to pick up and hold various sized foods and objects ○ Helps children learn how to bring foods, utensils and cups to the mouth
<p>Sensory Development</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provides the chance to experience and explore different food textures, temperatures and thicknesses ○ Prepares children for becoming more comfortable trying new foods after touching them first

<p>Relationships and Language</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offers the chance to engage in meaningful interactions with caregivers ○ Prepares children for social routines for mealtimes such as: hand washing, sitting to eat, serving themselves and others, pouring and scooping, using language and following directions
<p>Independence and Confidence</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offers children the chance to do tasks on their own which helps brain development ○ Offers a fun and rewarding experience for children that helps them feel good and enjoy mealtimes
<p>Learning About Self</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Allows children the chance to listen to their bodies and recognize when they are hungry and full ○ Teaches children concepts such as how to take small bites and sips, slow down when eating and drinking, chew food well, etc.

A group of young children happily feed themselves their afternoon lunch.



***Remember:** self-feeding does not make more work. When children learn to feed themselves, it actually leads to less intensive work for caregivers.*

TYPICAL SELF-FEEDING TIMELINE: DEVELOPMENTAL STEPS FOR SELF-FEEDING⁹

Starting around 6-7 months old is the typical timeframe (age range) when a child learns to feed herself using hands, utensils and cups. However, it is still imperative for caregivers to consider not only the child's age, but also her developmental skill level when deciding when to encourage self-feeding.

Although a child may be a certain age, it is more important that she has the necessary skills to become a successful self-feeder.

Below are the typical developmental skills that support the process of learning to eat using hands, utensils and cups and the developmental age at which they are often seen.

DEVELOPMENTAL AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL SKILL
2-3 Months	Child can bring hands to mouth when on tummy and back
3-4 Months	Child recognizes breast and/or bottle
4 Months	Child can bring hands to mouth when holding objects
5 Months	Child can independently hold bottle with one or both hands
5-6 Months	Child can mouth solid foods such as baby cookie/cracker/biscuit, etc.
6-7 Months	Child can feed self cookies/crackers/biscuits and drink from a cup held by caregiver
9 Months	Child can independently feed self using fingers and hold a spoon
12 Months	Child can hold and drink from cup with minimal spilling
12-14 Months	Child can bring loaded spoon to mouth
15-18 Months	Child can scoop food with spoon and bring to mouth
20-22 Months	Child can drink from a cup while holding it in one hand
24 Months	Child can bring spoon to mouth with a more mature grasp (palm up)
30 Months	Child can pour liquids from one container to another
31-32 Months	Child can independently feed self with minimal spilling
30-36 Months	Child can stab or pick up food using a fork



Offering a child many opportunities each day to explore a variety of foods, cups and utensils will speed along the process of learning how to feed themselves.



TYPES OF SELF-FEEDING

There are many ways a child learns to feed themselves. Initially, they learn how to use their fingers and hands for eating. Soon after, they begin learning the process of feeding themselves using various utensils and cups. As a caregiver supporting self-feeding skills of children, it is critical to offer every child many opportunities to practice these skills and during appropriate windows of time.

FINGER FEEDING

Finger feeding is the first way a child learns to feed himself. Children grasp and pick up foods with their hands and bring them to their mouths to eat and enjoy. It's a very rewarding activity! Finger feeding also allows children the opportunity to explore foods and get familiar with different sensations on their hands. This is a very important part of learning to eat. Children are much more likely to eat a food that they are able to first touch. Therefore, encouraging finger feeding; however messy it may be, is a critical part of learning to eat.

Finger feeding should be introduced around 6-7 months and when a child is showing the necessary skills to be successful and safe such as:

- ① Showing good head and neck strength.
- ② Sitting upright with little to no support.
- ③ Showing interest in foods.
- ④ Reaching and grasping for items.

UTENSILS, BOWLS AND PLATES:

There are many different types of utensils of various shapes, sizes, styles and materials. There are also many ways utensils can be adapted to fit the disability or medical needs of a child. Whatever the type of utensil chosen, it must match a child's mouth and her developmental and physical needs. Also, remember that learning to use these items will take time, so caregivers will need to provide a child with lots of support and frequent opportunities.

Spoons are often the first utensil for a child to use, as they are easiest to scoop food onto and move to the mouth. For young children who do not have good control of their hands and arms, spoons can be the best tool to teach self-feeding.



A little girl proudly holds her spoon as she feeds herself successfully with it for the very first time.

Bowls and plates come in a variety of types. Bowls and plates that stick to tables (suction cups on bottom) can be helpful for children who have a hard time holding one in place for scooping.

Placemats that stick to a surface can also be helpful for keeping bowls and plates in place on tables and floors.

Other common feeding items:

Forks and chopsticks can be offered to children for self-feeding; however, these utensils are often more difficult to use, especially for children with motor challenges.

Sporks are utensils that look like a spoon and a fork. This can be a great “in-between” tool for a child who is able to use a spoon and ready to learn how to use a fork.

Self-feeding using utensils, bowls and plates should be introduced around 8-9 months and when a child is showing the necessary skills to be successful and safe such as:

- Showing good head and neck strength.
- Sitting upright with little to no support.
- Showing interest in utensils, bowls and plates.
- Reaching and grasping for items.

Little boys eat a special yogurt by drinking it from their bowls.



CUPS:

There are many different types of cups, including various shapes, sizes, styles and materials. As with utensils, the type of cup must match a child's mouth, oral motor skills, developmental and physical needs.

Cups with lids and spouts can be helpful "first cups." However, open cups without lids offer the greatest benefits, and children often feel very motivated and proud to use them.

Self-feeding using cups should be introduced around 6-9 months and when a child is showing the necessary skills to be successful and safe such as:

- Showing good head and neck strength.
- Sitting upright with little to no support.
- Showing interest in cups.
- Reaching and grasping for items.



A child drinks from a special "nosey" cut-out cup, which makes learning to drink easier for her.



For more information on different cups and spoons, refer to Chapter 1, Section 7



Children feed themselves food using special maroon spoons.



A little girl takes a break from feeding herself a meal.






Young children drink from plastic sippy cups with the tops removed.

WHY DON'T SOME CHILDREN FEED THEMSELVES?

- ① **Physical:** A child's body and their capacity to use it appropriately and efficiently for feeding themselves.
- ② **Emotional:** A child's personal experiences that shape or motivate their interest in feeding themselves.
- ③ **Environmental:** A child's environment and how it helps or hinders opportunities for learning to self-feed.



REASONS	EXAMPLES
<p>Physical</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Unable to sit on own with stability to eat, drink and feed self ○ Unable to physically bring cup or food to mouth ○ Sensory avoiding issues such as a dislike of touching foods for feeding self or a need to smell foods when brought to mouth. ○ Mouth pain, problems with mouth/teeth or any part of the swallowing mechanism ○ Medical conditions that make learning to self-feed hard such as CP, Down syndrome, ASD, FASD, brain injury, etc. ○ Frequent choking when eating, drinking or being fed by another person which makes feedings scary
<p>Emotional</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not being adequately fed when hungry and unable to recognize on own when in need of food or drink ○ Being force fed by caregivers leading to eating refusals, including self-feeding ○ Unpleasant mealtime experiences leading to eating refusals, including self-feeding refusals ○ Unfamiliar with mealtime experiences (how to use utensils, cups, foods, liquids, task of self-feeding)
<p>Environmental</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not offered opportunities to try to feed self (finger feeding or using cups, bowls and utensils) ○ Caregivers and parents in certain cultures continue to feed older children as an expression of love and affection ○ No access to appropriate utensils and cups for self-feeding ○ Limited time at meals to allow children opportunities to self-feed ○ Limited caregivers (staffing issues) that prevent children from having opportunities to feed selves



KEY ELEMENTS OF SELF-FEEDING

KEY ELEMENTS	SIGNS OF SUCCESSFUL SELF-FEEDING
<p>Appropriate Position (matches child's needs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Safe, supportive and follows key elements of positioning including being fed in a seated, upright position with whole body support ○ Child and caregiver are comfortable ○ Child is engaged and interested (awake, reaching for cup or spoon, opening mouth for food or liquid, etc.) ○ Child is calm for feeding, not fussy
<p>Appropriate Utensil and Cup (matches child's needs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Finger foods appropriately match child's fine motor skills ○ Utensils, bowls and cups match child's size, skills and physical needs ○ Child comfortably and easily removes food or liquids using hands, utensils, bowls and cups ○ Child is not overly sensitive to feeding materials and is not flinching, gagging, pulling away, etc. ○ Handle and weight of utensil/bowl/cup allows child to hold, scoop, lift and bring toward mouth when she feeds herself
<p>Appropriate Opportunity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child has ample time and opportunity to explore foods, utensils, bowls and cups ○ Child has ample time and opportunity to feed self ○ Feeding takes 30 minutes or less
<p>Appropriate Foods and Liquids</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is offered appropriate foods that support easy finger feeding, spoon feeding and cup drinking ○ Child is gradually offered different foods and liquids as she becomes more skilled at feeding herself
<p>Appropriate Models and Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregivers eat and drink alongside child to show her how to use her hands, utensils, bowls and cups ○ Child eats and drinks alongside peers to show her how to use her hands, utensils, bowls and cups ○ Caregivers offer appropriate support for self-feeding during meals as needed by the child



SELF-FEEDING TIPS FOR EVERY CHILD

TIP 1:	<u>Always consider a child's individual needs and development level when introducing self-feeding.</u> Not every child will be interested or start trying to feed themselves at the same time.
TIP 2:	<u>Feeding yourself takes time and practice.</u> Learning to feed yourself is a process, whether a child has a disability or medical needs or not. The only way to learn is through lots of daily, frequent practice and thoughtful support from caregivers.
TIP 3:	<u>Finding the best method can sometimes take a lot of work.</u> Even a child who is typically developing, may need to try several spoons, cups, positions or food sizes until they find what works just right. Take your time, observe how a child does and make small changes as needed.
TIP 4:	<u>Good positioning is key.</u> Finding a safe and comfortable position for a child who is learning to feed themselves is critical. A stable position will make self-feeding much easier and more successful.
TIP 5:	<u>Start small and slow.</u> Try offering a child the chance to feed themselves for a small portion of a meal, and then help them with the rest. Make it a team effort. Take turns feeding the child (you offer a bite and then the child takes a turn). Slow but steady practice is a nice way to introduce this new experience.
TIP 6:	<u>Children learn best in the context of positive relationships.</u> Offering positive interactions with a child while they learn to feed themselves is the best way to support this new learning process.
TIP 7:	<u>Messy is OK.</u> Learning to feed yourself can be messy. However, getting messy is healthy because it teaches children how foods feel, widens their interests in trying foods/liquids and gives them the practice they need to become better self-feeders.
TIP 8:	<u>All children deserve the chance to learn this important life skill.</u> Learning to feed yourself is an important skill that can make a big difference for a child. Children with and without disabilities should be given the opportunity to participate in this powerful activity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Learning how to self-feed is a challenging, but incredibly rewarding experience for a child. When caregivers offer children the opportunity to grow these skills, children learn more than just how to eat and drink. They develop a valuable skill for life. Use this manual as a helpful resource. Remember: When met with challenges, seek out the support of others. Often, sharing past experiences, challenges and questions with other caregivers and team members can lead to greater problem-solving and creative solutions and alleviate caregiver and child distress.

For more information on encouraging self-feeding, refer to Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

For more information on creative ways to help children with self-feeding, refer to Chapter 9!