

Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Teaching A Child To Use A Knife And Fork Effectively

Using cutlery is a skill which we develop over several years, and which is perfected with continued use. If a child has poorly developed cutlery skills for their age, they may adopt inappropriate coping strategies. Parents/carers can use strategies to encourage development of more effective cutlery skills.

Underlying skills required:

- The ability to maintain a good sitting posture throughout tabletop tasks.
- The ability to maintain attention and concentration throughout tabletop tasks.
- The ability to use two hands together in tasks.
- The ability to complete opposing actions with each hand – (e.g., one hand staying still while the other hand moves).

If any of the underlying skills listed are difficult for the child, they should be worked on before focusing on effective use of cutlery.

General Guidelines

- 1) Ensure the child is competent with all the underlying skills.
- 2) Initially, do not practice cutlery skills at mealtimes – it can be too stressful for all concerned. Instead, use playdoh/clay at a different time of day.
- 3) Ensure the environment is free from distraction, and that all equipment is available and appropriately sized (e.g., table, chair, non-slip mat, cutlery).
- 4) Use key words as a verbal reminder, but don't overload them with verbal instructions – they need to feel the action of holding the fork still whilst moving the knife.
- 5) Give plenty of verbal and physical praise – rewards for doing well.
- 6) Practice general use of utensils and tools:-
 - a) Helping with cooking, baking, whisking, stirring in the kitchen.
 - b) Using play DIY tools – spanners, screwdrivers, wrenches, saws, etc.
 - c) Playing with clay, playdoh, model making kits.
 - d) Use of art and craft tools – scissors, glue spreaders, rulers, etc.

Useful tips

- 1) Use wider barrelled cutlery to begin with - the wider the handle the easier it is to hold and control.
- 2) Place a small sticker or mark at the neck of the handle where the tip of the index finger should be placed.



Teaching Cutlery Skills

- 1) Practice the use of a fork, and then the use of a knife before trying to do both together. (E.g., stabbing at food with a fork, or cutting with a knife whilst holding food with fingers – bread/toast).
- 2) Use hand over hand techniques to help the child to either hold the fork still or move the knife in a sawing action – don't expect them to be able to do both straight away.
- 3) Teach the appropriate grasp of cutlery – index finger resting on top of utensil. (Prompt the child, e.g. remember – pointy finger on top).
- 4) Start with softer foods that don't really need cutting and then move on to tougher foods.
- 5) Continue to partially cut up the child's meal and leave a small amount for them to do. Gradually increase the amount they must do as their skills develop.
- 6) Let them do all their cutting up first before starting to eat if they prefer.

Choosing food

To encourage independence at mealtimes, consider food that requires less cutting up, so that the child only needs to be competent with loading the fork and completing hand to mouth actions. For example: casseroles, curries, risottos, pasta dishes (shells, twists, etc), handheld food – fajitas, wraps, etc, stir fries.

When practising, cutting short and softer foods, e.g., carrots, potatoes, etc rather than meat.

Useful Equipment

Dycem /non-slip mat

Kura care or Nanna's Manners cutlery

Or standard cutlery with more barrel style handles

