

Paediatric Feeding Service Speech and Language Therapy Tops Tips

These tips are based on commonly asked questions by parents of children under one about weaning.

1

Signs of Readiness: Your baby shows readiness when they have good head and neck control, alongside trunk stability, so can sit up unaided with minimal support. When a baby is ready to begin the weaning journey, they will pay more interest in what others are eating. They will also bring toys and their hands to their mouth.

2

Positioning: Your child needs to be upright for safe swallowing, and well supported at the hips and trunk. We are looking for a 90-degree angle at the hips, knees and ankles and a support under the feet. You may find your child does get tired and possibly lean to either side at the beginning so consider adding a rolled up towel to keep them upright. If your child cannot reach the foot support, consider props such as books to bridge the gap!



3

Chat to your baby during mealtimes:

Make mealtimes enjoyable, eating as a family as often as you can. Sit at your child/baby's level, face to face to encourage them to interact. Chatting to your child/baby during mealtimes helps build a positive association with food.



4

Always supervise and follow their lead:

Supervise mealtimes and follow their lead with eating and drinking in a responsive manner. Provide many opportunities to practice their new eating and drinking skills.

5

Moving on with Texture:

Waiting too long to introduce solids or not offering a variety of safe textures can hinder a baby's ability to bite, chew and swallow safely. There is a motor window between the developmental ages of 6-10 months, which is the prime time for babies to be exposed to textures in order to learn to manage them. If we compare it to a child's gross motor development at this age, we provide lots of floor time opportunities to practice. We need to do the same with food: provide plenty of safe and age appropriate opportunities with food and drinking for babies to practice.

6

Gagging is normal: Gagging is nature's way of protecting the baby's airway. For babies who are starting solids, gagging is a natural response to new tastes, temperatures and textures. When something is new, gagging is a reflexive response to a loss of control until a baby figures out how to manage these age appropriate foods. As a baby has more practice at manipulating food in their mouth, the gagging reduces with consistent practice. **The key is practice and opportunities with age appropriate textures.** When your baby gags, try to stay calm. Talk softly to your baby, with simple phrases such as, 'you can, cough,' or 'push it out with your tongue.' Give them a few seconds to relax and they will resume eating. Observe for any signs of true choking (further advice the differences between gagging and choking are available).

7

Cup Drinking: Begin with a small open cup and transition to a straw cup overtime. Expect it to be messy and it will take time! Use what is available, don't stress that one cup is better than the other, use what is accessible to your family. Provide lots of opportunities to practice. Coughing is normal, give a child time to develop new skills—they will cough as they figure out how fast it flows, how to control it. Some days may be better than others.



8

Utensils: Provide opportunities for your baby to practice using utensils such as a spoon. Encourage your baby to feed independently under supervision age appropriate textures. Use a food tray for them to independently feed from, you can help to preload a spoon but don't worry if they prefer to use their fingers!

9

Encourage a Slow Pace: If you find your baby/child tends to over-stuff their mouth, be their speed bump – help them slow down their pace of eating by offering only one or two pieces of food on their tray or plate. Give them the option of serving themselves with small spoons, getting just small quantities at a time. Offer frequent sips of water from an open cup or straw cup. Model drinking water with meals yourself. This will help your baby wash down food and will slow down their pace of eating. Also talk to your baby during mealtimes as social interaction naturally slows down mealtimes.

10

Practice, practice, practice! Just like any new skill, a baby needs time to practice their ability to eat and drink. Offer a variety of age appropriate safe textures to help your baby bite, chew and swallow safely. It is common for babies to not like a taste when it is new, but with repeated exposures and consistency, they begin to enjoy these. Often as parents if we offer our baby a food 3-5 times and they do not enjoy it, we do not offer it again. Babies need more time than this. Most importantly have fun and enjoy this bonding experience with your baby.

For more information on weaning please see:

Weaning made easy: moving from milk to family meals | HSC Public Health Agency (hscni.net)

Getting a good start: healthy eating from one to five (English and translations) | HSC Public Health Agency (hscni.net)