

MOVEMENT FOR LEARNING: MEALS AND SNACKS



Young children need to develop gross and fine motor skills early to help them learn. Engaging children through food can improve motor skills while creating food skills and preventing picky eating. By handling, preparing, and eating foods children are introduced to new movements, tastes, and textures. Try some of these activities with your child, guided by their age and ability:



Infants are ready to start solids and use an open cup starting at around 6 months. You can start with an open cup by offering breastmilk, formula, or small amounts of water. At first your baby will need your help and may only take small amounts, but they will get better with practice. Wait until 9-12 months of age to introduce whole cow's milk (3.25%).



Children learn about food using all of their senses. Grasping, holding, and bringing finger foods to their mouth helps children learn new movement skills. Introduce finger foods around 7 months old and watch them transition from gripping foods with their entire hand to more precise pincer grasps. Try foods like soft black beans, grains of rice, frozen peas and carrots (thawed), chunks of tofu, or pieces of whole grain toast.



Grasping and playing with spoons and other utensils can start well before infants are ready to eat solid foods. Encourage and be patient as older infants begin to learn how to use spoons and other utensils. When getting started, your child may want your help scooping food onto a spoon before directing it to their mouth themselves.



Once your child is able hold foods between their thumb and forefinger, they may be ready to try threading pasta. Simply use a strand of uncooked spaghetti and have your child fit as many pieces of penne or other foods with hollow centres on each noodle as they can. You can use play dough to hold the spaghetti in place or keep it loose as an extra challenge.



Cookie cutters are fun tools in the kitchen and for play. They can be used to shape more than just cookies. Practice pressing them into pancakes or french toast for an extra special breakfast. Or try cutting apple and cheese slices in a variety of shapes at snack time.



Mix together different coloured cooked beans or pieces of vegetables and fruits for a tasty and nutritious counting and sorting game. Children can practice picking up or pushing the different coloured food into separate piles before eating.

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To keep your child interested and engaged in developing their skills, continue to raise the difficulty of the activities you set for them. Children love to show that they can do the things they see adults doing. There are many activities in the kitchen that children can be involved in. Start introducing your child to the kitchen by setting safety rules like staying away from hot stoves and not reaching for sharp or hot objects. Have a stool for them, so that they can easily see and reach working surfaces. Remember children should always be supervised when in the kitchen. Support your child in progressing through these activities based on their age and ability:



Does your child love splashing in water? Washing veggies is a great way for kids to play in the water while safely helping with meal time prep. Motor skills are developed as they scrub and pick through the veggies or fruits they are washing. Try using a colander or a salad spinner to make foods easier to reach in the sink.



Setting the table requires children to learn how to pick up objects of various weights and sizes and carefully place them where they belong. This helpful task can easily keep children busy until the meal is ready. Clearing dishes after a meal develops similar skills.



Measuring and pouring are essential skills in cooking and baking that develop controlled movements. Start by pre-measuring ingredients for children to pour as needed. As their skills improve you can allow your child to measure and pour ingredients themselves. Remember messes in the kitchen are a normal part of learning, help them clean it up and then try again!



Vegetables and fruits come in so many shapes and sizes. Before children are ready to handle knives, they can help prepare fruits and veggies by shelling peas, peeling clementines and bananas, tearing lettuce, or snapping asparagus into pieces. Provide help to get the activity started then let your child finish.



Cutting and chopping food is one of the most useful skills for your child to learn as they get older. Teach them how to safely handle kitchen tools by keeping sharp edges pointed away from their bodies. Starting with scissors and softer foods can be safer and easier. Advance to smaller knives once they can grip it properly. Choose foods that won't roll around on a cutting board.



You can't find a better place to learn a mix of fine and gross motor skills than in the garden. Plant some vegetables with your child in the garden or in a few pots and watch as they dig, plant seeds, pull weeds, and pour water to help them grow. Harvesting and eating will be the reward for all their work.