



MEALTIME FOR INFANTS

DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD



ABOUT THIS ROUTINE:

Mealtimes are a great opportunity to support STEM learning. As your baby starts trying solid foods around 6 months, talk about STEM ideas and use STEM words while you feed them or eat together.

Even young infants are taking in a lot! Your baby is using their **senses to explore** food by **touching, smelling, tasting,** or **looking** at everything on their tray. Try naming the foods your baby is trying and talk about how they **look, feel,** and **smell**. "This banana is **soft** and **yellow**. Can you feel how **squishy** it is?" This helps your baby **notice** the **properties of living things** like fruits and vegetables.

Your baby is also already sensitive to the idea of **volume**, even if they can't say the words yet. When you **fill** their cup or **add** food to their tray, say things like "**More** milk!" or "You have **two** pieces of banana" to build early awareness of **quantity** and **volume**.

Your baby is also starting to notice **patterns** in their daily routine and remember what comes **next**. When you follow the same **steps** at every meal, bib on, food on the tray, **first** this, **then** that, your baby begins to **anticipate** what **comes next**. Try saying, "**First** we put on your bib, **then** we eat!" to support early **sequencing** skills.

Try one or two of these activities at mealtime. With a little practice, feeding time can become a natural place to explore and learn together.

STEM LEARNING AREAS:

Life Science: Concepts related to living things

- **Living Things:** Animals, including insects and people, and plants

Physical Science: Concepts related to objects or things, what they do, and how they move

- **Structure & Properties of Materials:** Understanding characteristics of things and how those characteristics impact what things do

Computational Thinking: Concepts involved in programming computers and coding.

Math: Concepts related to numbers, patterns, shapes, and space, and how to use them to solve problems

- **Counting:** Communicating number words in order and matching each number to objects to find out "how many"
- **Patterns:** Things that repeat or change in a regular way, like colors, sounds, or movements happening again and again
- **Volume:** How much space something takes up or how much a container can hold.



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WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD'S LEARNING?

Every child is different. Do what works best for encouraging your child's independent exploration during this suggested daily routine. These are only suggested activity adaptations. Adaptations are simple changes you can make to your child's space, toys, or activities to help them stay engaged and learn STEM ideas and words during daily routines. Consider consulting your child's care team first.



Follow your child's lead and interests. Enthusiastically ask your child questions about what they are doing and what they like.



Answer your child's questions. If you do not know the answer, work together with your child to discover the answer.



Encourage your child to participate in the activity as much as possible. Praise your child's efforts and successes.

ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENT

Always ask your child's doctor, physical therapist, occupational therapist, or feeding-specific speech-language pathologist for input on feeding positioning.

For infants older than 6 months ONLY.

To help position your child for feeding, use pillows, stacking boxes or reams of paper to support their feet.



Image Credit: Feeding Littles
<https://www.feedinglittles.com/blog/starting-solids-the-importance-of-sitting-unassisted>

For infants older than 6 months ONLY.

For children with low motor tone, use a pillow or rolled up towel to support their trunk and body.



Image Credit: Feeding Littles
<https://www.feedinglittles.com/blog/starting-solids-the-importance-of-sitting-unassisted>

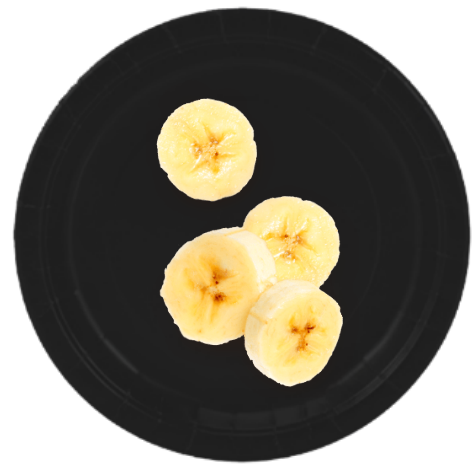


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MATERIALS

- Place an anti-slip/stabilizing mat below the plates/bowls so they do not move
- Use long/bigger handled utensils for easier grasping
- Place food items in low tray within reach
- Use small portions when introducing new food
- Use soft foods, and keep all cut sections of food smaller than a thumbnail to prevent choking
- If your child has difficulty picking up or grasping steamed or slippery, soft foods, add a little texturizer like dry baby oatmeal or rice to make it easier to grasp.
- Add texture to purees or sauces by thickening with baby oatmeal or rice. Thickeners encourage runny foods to stick to a spoon and make self-feeding easier. Always consult your OT, SLP, and/or feeding therapist to make sure your child can tolerate thickened foods.
- Use handled sippy cup or offer bowl and small, simple spoon to encourage self-feeding
- To make food more visible for your child, present food using high-contrast materials (e.g., place banana pieces on a dark plate)



- For easier grasping, adapt the utensils by building up the handles or creating grip straps using household items (e.g., masking tape, pool noodles)
- Offer a bowl and fork or spoon to promote self-feeding
- Small soft (steamed or naturally soft) fruit or vegetable such as banana, ripe pear, or avocado

More **MATERIALS** →





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MATERIALS

- Tray or plate with raised lip or rim to steady the food as your child handles it and explores it



- Provide long-handled spoons to make bringing food to mouth easier



Image Credit: Fabricate4All

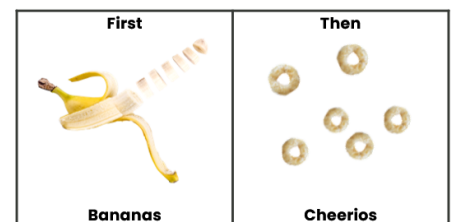
<https://www.fabricate4all.org/at-solution/built-up-handle-grips/>

INTERACTIONS OR INSTRUCTION

- Provide hand-over-hand support or be physically close by to help your child explore foods and direct utensils better
- Narrate or sign your child's actions as they interact and experiment with the utensils and foods ("Oh, you're scooping with your spoon!")
- Use a variety of methods of communication (sign language, gestures) to meaningfully engage your child
- Use pictures or icons to signal next steps or each step of the sequence
- Communicate with your child at eye level
- Speak or sign slowly, emphasize keywords, and wait for a response
- Praise your child's efforts (to try new foods) with words, facial expression, or body language
- Make eye contact and smile as you talk to your child
- Model tasting and trying the foods your child is having. Use gestures or signs and your voice to draw their attention to the properties of the food
- Encourage your child to manually handle the food and to explore it with their mouth. If your child seems interested in biting off pieces of soft food, watch carefully to ensure the size of food is manageable and not a choking hazard

Quick Tip:

Communication may include the use of words, signs, gestures, and different types of cues, such as touch, object, movement, or visual.





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ADAPTATIONS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

FIRST-THEN BOARD USE TO SIGNAL NEXT STEPS

First	Then



Need more visual cues?

Visit [STEMIE's Visual Cue Library](#) or check out STEMIE's tips for creating and using visual supports with [A Guide to Visual Supports](#).



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

For an infant with no/very little head control or who has rigid muscle tone, consult with care team first for handwashing alternatives.

1 – HAND WASHER SEQUENCER

Description: Help your child recognize that there are **steps** in daily routines. Encourage your child to follow the steps. “**First**, handwashing, **then** mealtime.” Use cues to help your child follow the steps if needed.

What My Child Is Learning!

Computational thinking is the method used to problem-solve by determining ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’.

Talk about the importance of following **steps**, a type of **sequence**. “By washing our hands **first**, we will know the food we make is safe to eat.” Ask, “What do you think **will happen** if we **miss a step**?”

Ask “**What should we do first? Next? Then what? Last?**” It might be fun to do **one step out of order** (like drying your hands before you turn on the water) and see if your child notices. Having pictures to show each step (turn on water, run hands under water, get soap, lather soap, rinse hands, turn off water, get towel and dry hands) can also be really helpful.

2 – “MORE” SENSER

Description: Help your child understand **how many/much** there is of food. Prepare your child’s favorite fruit(s) and cut into finger/bite-size pieces. Place the food in front of your child.

What My Child Is Learning!

Did you know children are sensitive to **quantity** before they learn how to **count**? Interact with your child as much as you can to help their learning. Here are some tips you can try with little effort.

You can **count** aloud as your child eats the food (**one, two, three**).

You can talk about the concept of **more/less**. For example, when your child has only one piece of food left, say, “One more bite and all done!”

While placing the food in front of your child, you can say, “I know you love banana, so I will give you **5 pieces** of banana and **1 piece** of blueberry.” Show the **numbers** using your fingers.



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

3 – SPOON INVESTIGATOR



Description: Help your infant **notice** and **explore what happens** when things **fall, bang, and move** during mealtime! Provide baby-safe plates, cups, and spoons for your child to **touch, taste, bang, and drop**. At this age, your child may prefer using their fingers instead of a spoon. That is perfectly okay! Allow them to experiment freely, like grabbing a spoon and **banging** it on a plate or **dropping** it on the floor **over and over again**.

What My Child Is Learning!

Children learn best by using their **senses** to **explore** the world around them. Even simple mealtime moments, like **dropping** a spoon or **banging** a bowl, are meaningful learning experiences! When you interact, narrate, and respond to your infant's curiosity, you are helping them develop early problem-solving skills, an understanding of **cause and effect**, and a **sense of the space** around them.

Talk about what your child is **noticing** and doing as they **explore**. "You **dropped** the spoon and it made a **loud sound**! What **will happen** if you drop it **again**? Let's see!" Narrating their actions out loud helps your infant begin connecting words to real experiences.

As your infant **bangs, drops, and explores**, try these:

- Encourage **motion** and **cause and effect**: "You hit the bowl and it **moved**! What happens if you hit it **softer**? What about **harder**?"
- Celebrate **repeated actions**: When your child **drops** a spoon on the floor **again and again**, lean in! "You **dropped** it **again**! **Down** it goes! Should we do it **one** more time?" **Repetition** is how infants learn to **predict what comes next**.
- Explore with the **senses**: Let your child **feel** the difference between a **soft silicone** spoon and a **hard plastic** bowl. "That spoon **feels smooth**, doesn't it? What does the bowl **feel** like?"
- Use **spatial language**: Help your child begin to understand where things are in **space**. "The spoon is **in front** of you! It **fell down** on the floor. Can you reach it? It is so **far**!"
- Try different **surfaces** and objects: Place a spoon on a plate versus a **soft** placemat and see if your child **notices** the **difference** in **sound**. "That was **loud**! Let's try this one. Is it **loud** or **quiet**?"



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4 – CUP INVESTIGATOR



Description: Help your infant **notice, explore**, and learn how to drink from a cup! Between 6 and 12 months, your child can begin learning to use a sippy cup. Provide a baby-safe, plastic, non-breakable sippy cup with handles for easy gripping. While helping your child figure out how to use their cup, you are also helping them develop early **problem-solving and critical thinking skills**.

What My Child Is Learning!

Young children are natural **problem solvers**, and they are learning how to solve problems every single day! When your infant tries to **figure out how** to get water into their mouth from a cup, they are doing real scientific thinking, **exploring, experimenting, and trying again**. When you interact, model, and encourage your child through this process, you are supporting their curiosity and building foundational STEM skills.

Talk about what your child is **seeing, touching**, and **doing** as they **explore** their cup. "This is your new cup! Look! It has **two** handles, **one** on each side. Can you **feel** them?" Narrating out loud helps your infant begin connecting words to real-life experiences.

As your infant **explores, holds**, and **experiments** with their cup, try these:

- Encourage **exploration** first: Before showing your child how to drink, let them **touch, mouth**, and **investigate** the cup on their own. "What does your cup **feel** like? Is it **hard** or **soft**? Look, it has holes right here where the water comes out!"
- Model the **steps** simply and slowly: "**First**, hold your cup with **two hands** just like this! Then **lift** it up to your **mouth**. Let's try together!" Offer gentle physical guidance if needed, and **repeat the steps** often. Infants learn through **imitation** and **repetition**!
- Celebrate **repeated attempts**: Your child may need several weeks of trying before they figure it out and that is completely normal! Every attempt is a learning experience. "You picked it **up**! You are getting so close. Let's try **one** more time!"
- Use **spatial language**: Guide your child's movements with simple **directional words**. "A little bit **higher**! Tip it **up** just a little more. There it is. You did it!"
- Build **routine and anticipation**: Use the same words and steps each time you introduce the cup. Over time, your child will begin to recognize the routine and **anticipate what comes next**. "It's time for water! What do we do **first**? We hold our cup with **two hands**!"



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

5 – FOOD INVESTIGATOR

Description: Help your infant **explore** foods through their **senses**! While feeding your child, talk about the **tastes, temperatures, textures, colors, and smells** of different **foods**. When introducing finger foods, offer a variety of safe choices and encourage your child to **touch, smell, look at, and taste** new **foods**. Every bite is a chance to explore and discover!

What My Child Is Learning!

Children learn best by interacting with people and objects. Your infant is already **noticing** the world around them by **observing colors, feeling textures, and reacting to new smells and tastes**. When you name what they are experiencing and follow their curiosity, you are helping them build early science skills and develop critical thinking. Introducing STEM words during mealtime helps your child make connections between language and real-life experiences.

Talk about the **properties and textures** of each **food** as your child explores it. "**Feel** this banana. It is **soft** and **smooth**! Now **feel** this cracker. Does it **feel** the **same**? It is **hard** and **bumpy**!" Describing what your child is **sensing** out loud helps them begin to **notice** and **compare** the **characteristics** of the world around them.

As your infant **tastes, touches, and investigates** their **food**, try these:

- **Observe** together: Hold up a piece of **food** and **look** at it with your child before eating. "Look at this blueberry! It is **round** and **purple**. What do you think it will **taste** like?"
- Talk about **temperature**: "This applesauce is **cool**. Does it feel **cold** on your **tongue**? Now let's try your **warm** oatmeal. Can you **feel** the **difference**?"
- Describe **tastes**: Watch your child's face as they try something new and narrate what you see. "Ooh, that was **sour**! Your face tells me it was a big surprise! Let's try another bite."
- Follow their cues: Your infant communicates even without words! Watch for turning toward a food, reaching, pointing, or looking back at you. Respond to their curiosity. "You keep looking at that strawberry! Would you like to touch it? How does it feel — smooth or bumpy?"

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY IDEAS:

- Take the meal outside and have a picnic
- Check out these books about mealtime:
 - *Mealtime (Toddler Tools®)* by Elizabeth Verdick & Marieka Heinlen
 - *Yummy! Mealtime – Touch and Feel* by Little Hippo Books
 - *eat/comer* by Elizabeth Verdick & Marjorie Lisovskis

