

MEALTIME FOR INFANTS

DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

Every child is different, and these are only suggested adaptations and activities. Do what works best for encouraging your child's independent exploration during this daily routine. Consult your pediatrician, physical therapist (PT), and/or occupational therapist (OT) first.



Mealtimes are a great opportunity to support STEM learning. You can talk about STEM ideas and use STEM words as you feed or talk with your child as they start trying solid foods (right around 6 months).

Children can learn about quantity (*"One more bite!"*), volume (*"This cup has more milk."*), sequencing (*"First eat the banana, then a Cheerio."*), physical properties (*"It is too hot. My ice cream is melting!"*), and plants (*"Carrots grow in the ground, but apples grow on trees."*)

Children learn new things when they practice them in everyday routines. Try one or two of the following activities during mealtimes. With a little bit of practice, mealtime can become a natural place to talk and learn about STEM. Use these ideas to set up the environment and materials to best suit your child's needs.



MEALTIME FOR INFANTS ADAPTATIONS

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ACCESS/ENVIRONMENT

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

- **NEVER POSITION INFANTS YOUNGER THAN 6 MONTHS IN THE FOLLOWING ADAPTED POSITIONS. 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>



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.



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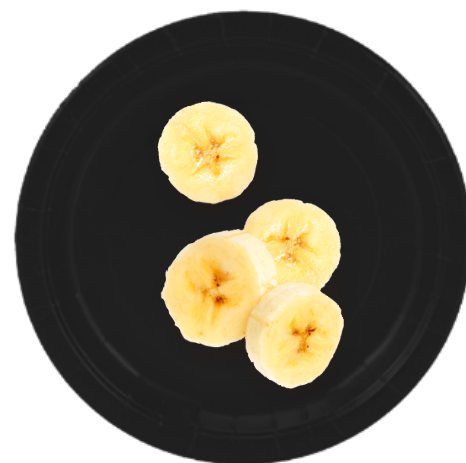
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MATERIALS

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

- 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)



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MATERIALS

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

- 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
- 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/>



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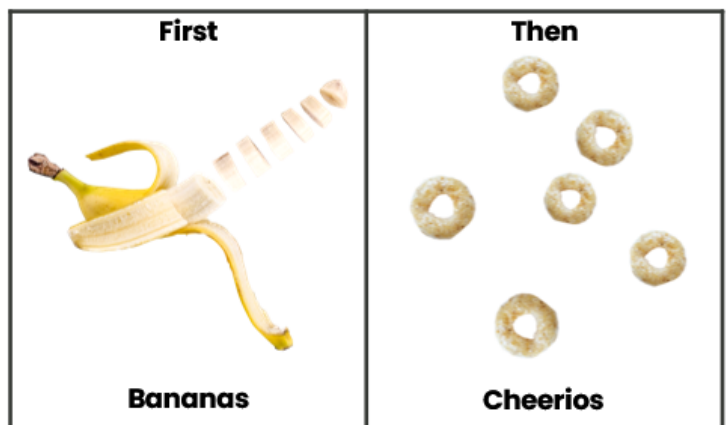
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INTERACTIONS/INSTRUCTION WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD'S LEARNING?

Note: Communication may include the use of words, signs, gestures, and different types of cues (e.g., touch, object, movement, visual, etc.)

- Provide hand-over-hand support to help your child explore foods better
- Narrate/sign your child's actions as they experiment with the foods
- Use a variety of methods of communication (e.g., sign language, gestures) to meaningfully engage your child
- Use pictures and/or icons to signal next steps and/or each step of the sequence
- Communicate with your child at eye level
- Speak/sign slowly, emphasize keywords, and wait for a response
- Praise your child's efforts (e.g., to try new foods) with words, facial expression, or body language
- Make eye contact and smile as you talk to your child
- Provide hand-over-hand support or be physically close by if needed to help your child direct utensils and explore foods together
- Narrate/sign your child's actions as they experiment with the utensils and foods ("Oh, you're scooping with your spoon!")
- Model tasting and trying the foods your child is having. Use gestures/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



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VISUAL CUES: FIRST/THEN BOARD USE TO SIGNAL NEXT STEPS

First	Then



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EXPLORATION I

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For an infant with no/very little head control or who has rigid muscle tone, consider using a cleaning wipe instead of soap and water as an alternative.

Hand Washer

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

What My Child Is Learning!

Children learn best by interacting with people and objects. Introduce STEM words, ask questions, and encourage them to recognize patterns in their daily routines. Help your child make a connection between words and real-life experiences and develop fundamental critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

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 (e.g., dry 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.





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EXPLORATION II

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Food Investigator

Description: Help your child **explore** foods through their **senses**. While feeding your child, talk about the **tastes, temperature, textures, and colors** of the food.

When introducing finger food to your child, provide different food and drink choices and encourage your child to explore new foods with **different senses** (e.g., smell, sight, sound, feel).

What My Child Is Learning!

Children learn best by interacting with people and objects. Introduce STEM words, ask questions, and encourage them to explore various foods. Help your child make a connection between words and real-life experiences and develop fundamental critical thinking skills.

While feeding apple sauce, describe the **tastes and textures (sweet, smooth, soft, mushy)**.

Infants at this age are still learning how to say words but they may already have numerous ways to communicate! Watch for their cues as they may express their **curiosity and interest** by turning toward an object or pointing to something. Using open-ended questions offers an opportunity for children to **explore** an object that they are interested in.

While feeding apple sauce, your child is looking at the banana on the table and then looking back at you. You can say: "Do you want a banana? **Would you like to try it/touch it? How does it feel like? Soft or hard?**"





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EXPLORATION III

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More Asker

Description: Help your child understand '**how many/much**' there is of food. Prepare your child's favorite fruit(s) and cut into fingers/bite-size pieces. Place the food in front of your child. Interact with your child and use language or games to help your child learn about **quantities**.

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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Spoon Searcher

Description: Help your child **notice and explore what happens when things fall down or bang together** through their **senses**. Provide baby-safe plates, cups, spoons, etc. for your child to explore. At this age, children may still prefer to use fingers instead of using a spoon. Allow them to **experiment with the tools' use** (e.g., grab a spoon and bang it on a plate, repeatedly drop a spoon on the floor).

What My Child Is Learning!

Learning how to use tools and utensils at mealtime offers an opportunity for children to develop self-feeding skills and critical thinking skills, such as **cause and effect** and **spatial relationships**. Interacting with your child as they explore encourages and facilitates these learning experiences.

Children love dropping stuff on the floor again and again! This is a great learning opportunity for your child to learn the **properties of objects** and **notice the relation between actions and consequences**. Understanding these concepts helps children develop **problem-solving skills** and **make predictions**. You can encourage this learning experience by asking:

- **"What will happen if we drop tissues on the floor? Let's try! Are tissues loud or quiet when they fall?"**
- **"What will happen if we hit the bowls softer?"**

Your child is still learning how to use objects to feed themselves. They use their mouths to learn the **characteristics of objects** or try different ways to **understand how things move and fit in space**. You can enhance this learning experience by interacting with your child and using spatial language (e.g., *"It is too far! The spoon is on your table. The bowl is in front of you."*)





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EXPLORATION V

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Cup Drinker

Description: Help your child **notice and respond** to **things that occur** in their environment. Your child can start learning to drink from a cup between 6-12 months. Provide a baby-safe, plastic, and non-breakable sippy cup with grips. While showing your child how to use a cup, you are also helping your child **solve problems**.

What My Child Is Learning!

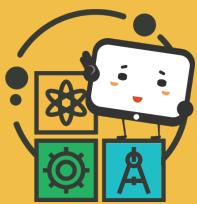
Young children are natural problem solvers, and they are learning **how to solve problems** every day. For example, you may notice they roll over to reach a toy or try to open a box to get their favorite toys.

Problem-solving is part of critical thinking skills and requires a lot of **trial-and-error** and learning experiences. When children start learning how to use a cup, the problem for them is "How do I get the water into my mouth?" You can help them solve this problem by doing this:

- Let them explore the cup first. While exploring, say, "This is your new cup! Look, it has **two handles**."
- Show them how to use the sippy cup accompanying some descriptions and steps, such as "**First**, hold your cup with **two hands**, and **then** lift it up to your **mouth**." Model the steps and provide physical guidance if needed.

Give them opportunities to **try and experiment**. They might need a few weeks to figure out what they are supposed to do. While they are experimenting with how to use the cup, you can help your child by providing positive comments with STEM words. For example, "That's right. Just a little bit **higher!**"





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ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY IDEAS

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- 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

