



MEALTIME FOR TODDLERS

DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD



ABOUT THIS ROUTINE:

Mealtimes are a great opportunity to support STEM learning. As your toddler grows and explores new foods, talk about STEM ideas and use STEM words while you eat together.

Even toddlers are taking in a lot of information about their environment! Your toddler is using their **senses to explore** food by **touching, smelling, tasting, or looking** at everything on their tray. Try naming the foods your toddler 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 toddler **notice** the **properties of living things** like fruits and vegetables.

Your toddler is also building early math skills, even if they can't **count** yet. When you **fill** their cup or add food to their plate, say things like "**More** milk!" or "You have **two** pieces of banana" to build early awareness of **quantity** and **numbers**.

Your toddler is also starting to understand **order** and remember **what comes next**. When you follow the same **steps** at every meal, hands washed, bib on, food on the plate, **first** this, **then** that, your toddler begins to **anticipate** what **comes next**. Try saying, "**First** we wash your hands, **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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ADAPTATIONS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

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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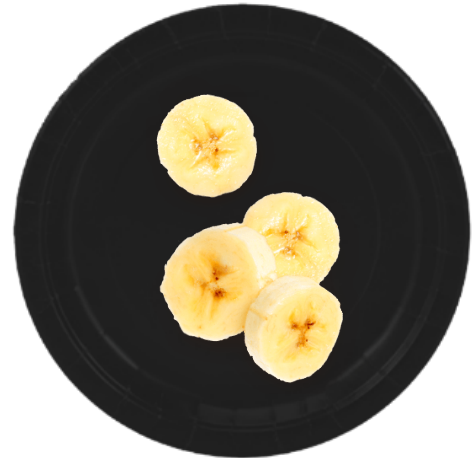
ADAPTATIONS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

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)



Image Credit: green sprouts



- 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
- 'Chain' new foods - encourage picky eaters to tolerate new food on their plate before asking them to touch it or taste it. Once they are willing to touch or taste, expand repertoire with similar foods (if they will eat apple slices, try dried apples next).

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 a toddler 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.

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 – FOOD OBSERVER

Description: Help your child discover where **food** comes from! While eating together, ask your toddler simple questions about what’s on their plate, like where it came from or what it **looks, smells, and feels** like. Build on their answers with short, fun explanations, like “This **apple** grew on a **big tree**. It **needed sunshine and water to grow**, just like you!”).

What My Child Is Learning!

Mealtime is a wonderful opportunity to help your toddler begin to understand that **food** comes from **plants or animals**. You can spark early science thinking by **exploring food** together through **touch, smell, and taste**, like “Where do you think this came from?”, “Is it **soft** or **crunchy**?”, “This **egg** came from a **chicken**. Can you **cluck** like a **chicken**?”.

Using simple questions and the word “think” encourages your toddler to **make predictions** and stay curious about the world around them.



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

3 – FOOD PATTERNER



Description: Help your toddler **notice** that things can **repeat in a pattern!** Place **two** different foods in front of your toddler, like banana slices and blueberries. Start a simple **AB-AB pattern** by placing **one** banana slice, then **one** blueberry, then **one** banana slice in a row. Point to each food as you go and say, "Banana, blueberry, banana, blueberry!" Then pause and ask, "**What comes next?**" Help your toddler point to or place the next food. It's okay if they need help, doing it together is the goal!

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, as well as math skills.

Patterns are all around us! Your toddler can spot them on a **striped** shirt, in a **clapping song**, or right on their plate. At first, your toddler may **notice** that something is **repeating** before they can name or describe it, this is the first step toward recognizing patterns! With practice, they will start to recognize, describe, and even build their own simple **ABAB patterns**.

Why does it matter? When your toddler follows the **ordered steps** of placing banana, then blueberry, with your modeling and gentle guidance, they are also building early **sequencing** skills. Over time, they begin to understand that **steps** go in a certain **order** to reach a goal, and may even **fix** the order on their own if something is out of place. These early skills, noticing patterns and understanding sequences, lay the foundation for logic and **problem-solving** in school and beyond!

You can also make a simple placemat with an AB pattern printed on it (see the card above) to help your toddler know where to place each food. Slipping it into a Ziploc bag makes it easy to wipe clean.



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

4 – FOOD MOVEMENT INVESTIGATOR



Description: Help your toddler **explore** what happens when they **move** food from one place to another! Set out **two** baby-safe bowls, a spoon, and some dry cereal. Show your toddler how to **scoop** the cereal from one bowl and pour it into the other. Say the words as you go: "I am **scooping** the cereal! Now I am **pouring** it in!" Then let your toddler try! Let them experiment with the spoon in their own way. When they are ready, add a little milk and invite them to **notice what changes**. Ask, "What does the cereal feel like now?" or "What should we do next?" It is okay to get messy, that is part of the fun!

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.

Scooping and **pouring** are some of the first ways toddlers discover how their **actions can make things move and change**! At first, your toddler may simply **notice** the cereal **moving** and want to **repeat the action again and again**. That is their way of exploring **cause and effect**! With practice, they begin to scoop and pour with more purpose, noticing how hard they have to **push**, how **full** the bowl gets, and what happens when the milk is added.

Along the way, your toddler is using all of their **senses to investigate** by **touching**, **listening**, and **looking to figure out how** the world works. Matching words to actions, like "**scoop**," "**pour**," "**full**," "**empty**," "**crunchy**," and "**soft**," helps them connect what they are doing to what they are learning. These early hands-on experiences with **force**, **motion**, and **change** build a strong foundation for STEM thinking!

Using open-ended questions is another great way to encourage your toddler's critical thinking skills and STEM learning. For example:

- After scooping the cereal into a bowl, you may ask "What should we do **next**?"
- After adding milk, ask "**What happens** when cereal stays in milk for too long?" or "How did the cereal **changed** when the milk was added?"



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ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR DAILY ROUTINE EXPLORATIONS WITH YOUR YOUNG CHILD

5 – FOOD COMPARER

Description: Help your child to **observe and recognize what the same and what is different** about their meals. While having a meal, ask your toddler to **sort or classify** the food into groups, like vegetables; fruits, color, size. Encourage your toddler to describe the **similarities and differences**.

What My Child Is Learning!

During the process of **sorting and classifying**, your toddler learns to observe and group objects based on their similarities and differences. This is an important fundamental skill to support children's development of reasoning and math (e.g., geometry). This is also supporting children's observation skills which is an important scientific practice that children engage in with science learning

To develop the skills of sorting and classifying, there is no need to buy expensive STEM toys. You can always incorporate this learning opportunity into your regular breakfast, lunch, and dinner time. You can encourage your toddler to classify items based on **pre-determined groups**, like size, color, or shape. For example, you may ask "**Can you help me put all the round shaped food we have for lunch today over here and all the non-round shaped food over here?**" You can also encourage your toddler to **sort** items according to self-determined **attributes/property**. "I put all these together because they taste yummy!"

To help with **sorting or classifying**, you can also offer differently colored cups or bowls for grouping different food items.

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
- Check out these books about where **food** comes from:
 - *Food* by Ladybird
 - *My First Book of Growing Food* by duopress labs
 - *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss

