

MEALTIME FOR TODDLERS

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 young toddler during mealtimes.

Children can learn about quantity (“You have two crackers!”), volume (“This cup has more milk.”), sequencing (“First eat the carrot, 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 TODDLERS 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 Toddlers 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>

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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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MATERIALS

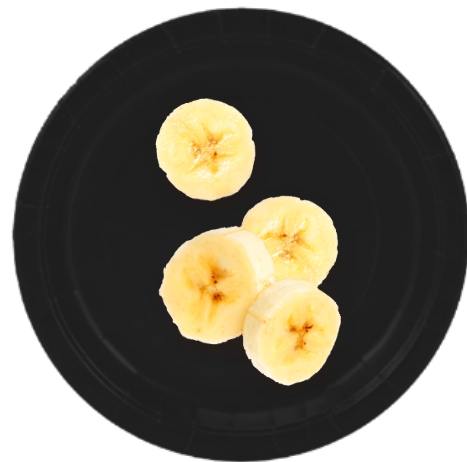
WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD'S LEARNING?

- Minimize distractions so that your child can be more engaged during mealtime.
- 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.



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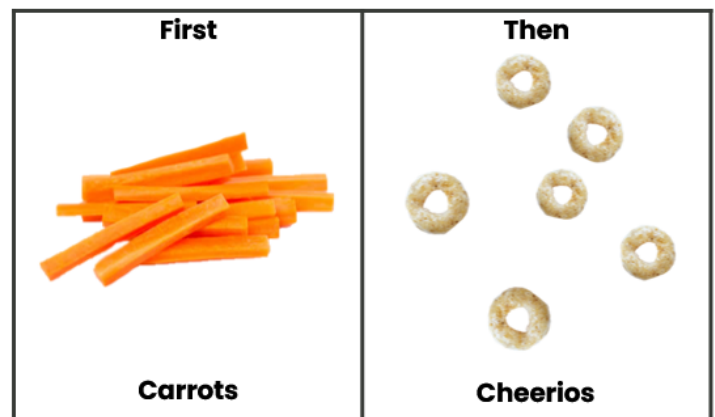
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INTERACTIONS/INSTRUCTION WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD'S LEARNING?

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
- '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).



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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 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.

Hand Washer

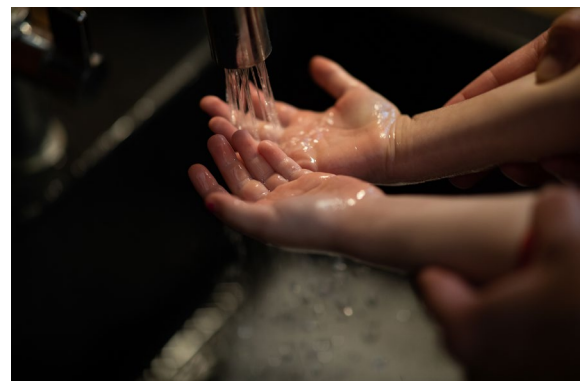
Description: Help your child recognize that there are **steps in daily routines**. Encourage your child to **follow the steps**. *"First, handwashing, then making cookies."* Use cues to help your child **follow the steps** if needed.

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 Patterner

Description: Help your child recognize that there are **steps or patterns to daily routines**. Provide two different food items and encourage your toddler to **copy a simple AB pattern**.

Create a simple AB-AB pattern using two foods such as banana slices (a) and blueberries (b) in a row. Model eating a banana slice first, then a blueberry and say, "**I am having a banana first, then a blueberry.**" Repeat the action at least three times. Then, ask your child **what is next?** Have your child point to the food and copy the pattern.

What My Child Is Learning!

Patterns are all around us. Children love to find patterns in their everyday lives. They can **find and notice the patterns** on a striped shirt, zebra skin, or even in songs.

Why is learning patterns so important? **Learning patterns can help children understand logic, make predictions, and solve problems.** These are fundamental skills for later STEM learning and success.

Besides modeling how to create a pattern, you can also use a simple laminated placemat for AB - pattern (print the card below and put in a Ziploc or trace it on wax paper yourself) for communications.





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EXPLORATION III

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Meal Engineer

Description: Help your child **notice and explore what happens when moving liquids** into a bowl or cup through their **senses**. Provide two baby-safe bowls and a spoon. Model how to scoop/pour the cereal from one bowl to another and describe the action. Have your toddler repeat the task. Allow your toddler to **experiment** with the **scooping, pouring, and filling** in their own way. Do not forget it is okay to get messy!

What My Child Is Learning!

During this age, your toddler starts showing interest in **scooping, pouring, and filling** the containers. **Scooping, pouring, and filling** are not only great times for your toddler to develop fine motor skills, but also great opportunities to explore and discover STEM concepts, such as **cause & effect, gravity, volume**.

Your toddler may start communicating with you using words or gestures. Matching your actions with words can help your toddler understand the concept. For example, you can say "**Scoop**" when you scoop dry cereal into a bowl and say "**Pour**" when you add milk to the bowl.

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, encourage your toddler to explore using different senses. Then ask "*What happens when cereal stays in milk for too long? or how the cereal changed when the milk was added?*" Model attribute description words such as **hard, crunchy, and soft**.





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Meal 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 (i.e., 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** (e.g., 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** (e.g., "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.





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EXPLORATION V

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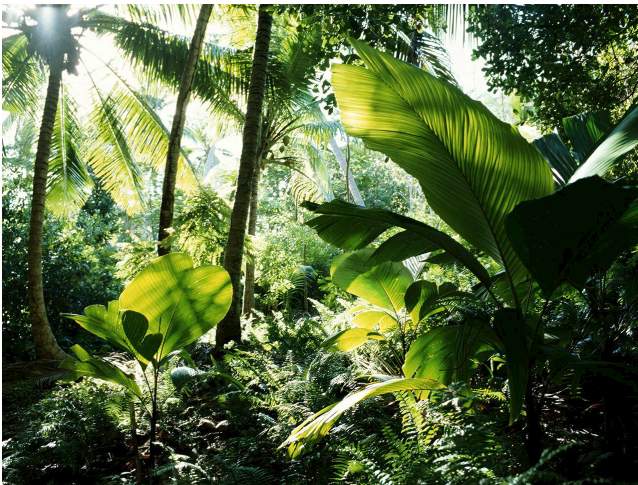
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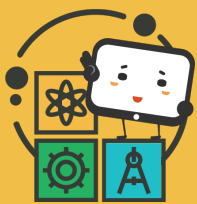
Meal Explorer

Description: Help your child understand where some food comes from. While having a meal, ask your child to guess where this food comes from, or why you like this food. Expand your toddler's answers by providing more details (e.g., ***talk about how an apple tree grows***).

What My Child Is Learning!

This is also a great opportunity to help your toddler understand that some food comes from plants, and some food comes from animals. You can ***expand your toddler's knowledge and understanding in science by discussing living things or the food*** (e.g., "Where do you think the food comes from?", "How do you think this will taste?"). Using the language of "think" may begin to elicit children's engagement and understanding of predictions.





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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
- 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

