



SECTION 1.7: CUP DRINKING BASICS




WHAT IS CUP DRINKING?

Cup drinking is usually the next feeding step that children experience during their first year of life after the introduction of the spoon. Most children can be introduced to a cup between 6-9 months old. This starting age is important because it's when a child is learning to crawl. This activity builds trunk (body), shoulder and neck strength that also supports the jaw for drinking from a cup. By this age, children have had practice eating from a spoon, which is excellent preparation for cup drinking. It's also a great example of how all parts of the body and development are connected.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CUP DRINKING?

Cup drinking is important because:

- ① It is critical in a child's development of oral motor skills.
- ② It assists with development of skills for chewing and using hands and fingers for self-feeding.
- ③ It is a fun, new experience and way for children and caregivers to interact.

BENEFITS OF CUP DRINKING	DESCRIPTIONS (WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE)
<p>Oral Motor Skills</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaches children how to stabilize (steady) the lips and jaw for supporting a cup ○ Shows children how to pull back the tongue for liquids ○ Teaches children how to open the mouth for different amounts of liquids ○ Shows children how to control faster flowing liquids using the lips, cheeks, tongue and jaw
<p>Sensory Development</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offers children practice managing different sip sizes ○ Provides children the chance to try different liquid flavors, temperatures and thicknesses
<p>Relationships and Language</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offers children the chance to engage in meaningful interactions with caregivers ○ Prepares children for social routines for mealtimes such as: hand washing, sitting to eat or drink, taking turns, using language and following directions

TYPICAL CUP DRINKING TIMELINE: DEVELOPMENTAL STEPS FOR CUP DRINKING⁹

There is a typical time frame (age range) for when a child learns to drink from a cup. However, it is imperative for caregivers to consider the child's age, and his developmental skill level when deciding when to introduce cups. Although a child may be a certain age, it is more important that he has the necessary skills in order to become successful drinking from a cup.



Introducing cups is a process that takes practice and time. On average, children will master (open) cup drinking by around 3-4 years old. This means that they will need extra support from caregivers for quite some time. Be patient.

Below are the typical developmental skills that support the process of learning to drink from a cup and the developmental age at which they are often seen:

DEVELOPMENTAL AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL SKILL
6 Months	Child can take sips from a cup when held by a caregiver
12 Months	Child can hold cup and take sips with some spilling
20-22 Months	Child can hold small cup in one hand while drinking
30 Months	Child can pour liquid from a container

A young boy drinks from an open cup all by himself.





TYPES OF CUPS⁹

There are many different types of cups, including various shapes, sizes, styles and materials. The type of cup must match a child's mouth, oral motor skills and developmental and physical needs. It's helpful to understand the differences in order to make the best choice for every child. Ultimately, a child will let caregivers know which cup they prefer and works best.



CUP TYPES: OPEN, SIPPY, STRAW

Cups come in a variety of types including open cups, sippy cups and cups with straws.

Open cups do not have a lid. They offer the greatest oral motor learning experience for a child. They require a child to use every part of their mouth, which in turn makes their mouth muscles grow stronger.



Sippy cups have a lid with a spout that keeps liquids from spilling. They offer convenience, as they can be moved around easily and create less of a mess. However, sippy cups do not offer the same skill development as open cups.



Straw cups have a straw and they can vary when it comes to having a lid. They are a good option for encouraging oral motor development and when combined with a lid, they can be very handy.

When choosing the type of cup, it's best to offer a variety of options for a child to practice with over time.

From Left:
Handle Cup,
Smooth Cup,
Nosey "cut-out" Cup



CUP SHAPES: HANDLES, SMOOTH, CUT-OUT

Cups come in many different shapes. Cups can be smooth without handles, they can have one or two handles or they can have cut-outs that make drinking easier and safer for certain children.

Smooth cups without handles are very common and easy to find. They work well for children who have typical fine motor/hand skills.

Cups with handles are helpful for children who may need something to grip when drinking from a cup.

Cut-out cups work well for children who need to keep their heads and chins forward and down instead of tilting up and back to drink. They are helpful for caregivers who assist children with drinking. They allow you to see the liquid pour out, which helps control the sip size and rate of drinking for a child.



When choosing a cup, the shape must fit the size and shape of the child's hands and match their physical needs.

CUP SIZES: BIG AND SMALL

Cups come in a variety of sizes. Choosing a cup size depends on if the child is independently drinking or if they are being fed liquids by a caregiver.

Smaller, child-sized cups can become tiring for caregivers to use, while larger cups can make holding, lifting and aiming for the mouth more challenging for children drinking on their own.



Select a cup size that suits the primary feeder best.

**CUP MATERIALS: GLASS, CERAMIC, PLASTIC, PAPER; HEAVY AND LIGHT**

Cups are made of many different materials such as: glass, ceramics or plastic. Children will often have a preference or need for a specific material.

Glass and ceramic cups are more durable, but for children who have sensitive mouths, the cold and harder textures can be off-putting. These types of cups are heavier and harder to hold, they can damage a child's gums or teeth and be dangerous for children with strong bite reflexes.

Plastic and paper cups can be more comfortable for children and lighter and easier to hold, but they are not as durable and provide less stability for new cup drinkers who need to bite the lip of a cup for added support.

Caregivers must choose a cup that is safe, allows for easy self-feeding, and fits the child's unique sensory and physical needs.





A young girl takes a sip from an open, plastic cup.

WHEN TO CLEAN AND REPLACE CUPS

Before using new cups, always wash them in hot, soapy water or in a dishwasher. Cups should also always be washed after every single feeding. Cups should be regularly checked for wear and tear. Always replace any cups that show signs of excessive wear or that may be harmful to a child.



Avoid using glass or metal cups with young children first learning to use cups. These cups can damage teeth and gums, break in a child's mouth causing injuries and heighten a child's sensitivities making drinking a negative experience. Offer a softer, safer type of cup made of plastic.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR CUP DRINKING¹⁹

- ① **Step 1:** Introduce cups when a child shows they are physically ready (sitting up and holding head and neck upright) of an appropriate age, and they are showing interest in cup drinking).
- ② **Step 2:** Offer small tastes of familiar soft foods or thickened liquids off of the lip of a cup if cup drinking is challenging or upsetting to a child. Small amounts are less overwhelming.
- ③ **Step 3:** Hold the cup far enough away from the child's face so he can see the cup and contents. Let him see the cup and wait for him to open his mouth to show he is ready.
- ④ **Step 4:** Place the cup on the child's bottom lip, tilt slightly and pour small sips at a time into his mouth.
- ⑤ **Step 5:** Let the child try to remove the liquid from the cup using his lips, jaw and tongue.



- *If a child is not interested or is distracted, do not force or sneak the cup into his mouth. This can lead to refusals.*
- *Do not pour liquids directly onto the tongue of a child's open mouth. This is not how we drink.*
- *Do not tip a cup too high or pour too quickly. This will make more liquids pour out too fast for a child to manage.*
- *Do not scrape liquids off of a child's lips or face. This can lead to refusals because it doesn't feel good.*



Remember: It's OK if a child starts reaching for the cup. Let him try to guide the cup to his mouth.

It's OK if a child gets messy during a mealtime. This is all part of the process to help them learn.

A little girl learns how to drink from a special “nosey” cut-out cup.





KEY ELEMENTS OF CUP DRINKING (AGES 6-9+ MONTHS)

KEY ELEMENTS	SIGNS OF SUCCESSFUL CUP DRINKING
<p>Appropriate Position (matches child's needs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Safe, supportive and follows key elements of positioning including being fed in a seated, upright position ○ Child and caregiver are comfortable ○ Child is engaged and interested (awake, reaching for cup, opening mouth for cup, etc.) ○ Child is calm for feeding (not fussy)
<p>Appropriate Cup (matches child's needs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lip of cup fits comfortably and easily in child's mouth ○ Child comfortably and easily swallows liquids from cup – large amounts of liquid aren't spilled ○ Child is not overly sensitive to cup material and is not flinching, gagging, pulling away, excessive biting, etc. ○ Shape, size and weight of cup are comfortable for caregiver and allow child to hold, lift and bring toward mouth when self-feeding
<p>Appropriate Pacing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregiver offers child ample time to take single sips from cup before removing from her mouth ○ Caregiver offers child ample time to swallow sips before introducing another ○ Caregiver offers child one sip at a time from a cup ○ Feeding takes 30 minutes or less
<p>Appropriate Liquids</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is offered thicker (slower flowing) liquids when first learning to drink from a cup such as yogurt drinks or milk (if appropriate) ○ Child is gradually offered thin liquids as she becomes more skilled drinking from a cup ○ Child is offered thicker (slower) liquids as she begins practicing drinking independently ○ Child is offered thickened (slower) liquids if she shows signs of difficulty with thin (faster) liquids such as: coughing or choking.
<p>Appropriate Sip Sizes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is offered small, single sips when she first begins drinking from a cup ○ Child is gradually offered larger sips as she becomes more skilled drinking from a cup



CUP DRINKING TIPS FOR EVERY CHILD

TIP 1:

Not every child will do well with the same cup. Consider children's individual needs and abilities. Finding the best cup can sometimes take a lot of work. Even a child who is typically developing, may need to try several cups until they find the one that works just right. Take your time, observe how a child does and make small changes as needed.

TIP 2:

Always consider a child's developmental skill level when choosing a cup. Do not only consider their age when thinking about introducing cups. Children need to be able to sit upright and have good head and neck control.

TIP 3:

Drinking from a cup takes time and practice. Learning to drink from a cup is a process, whether a child has a disability or medical needs or not. The only way to learn is through lots of daily, frequent practice.

TIP 4:

Good positioning is key. Finding a safe and comfortable position for a child who is cup drinking is critical. A stable position will make independent drinking that much easier, too.

TIP 5:

Start small and slow. Keep sip sizes on the small side and start with a slower rate of sips — especially with new drinkers. The slower the rate and the smaller the sips, the easier and safer it will be for a child to manage and swallow. Remember, when a child first learns to drink from a cup, bottle or breastfeeding continue to be their primary routes of liquid nutrition.

TIP 6:

Children learn best in the context of positive relationships. Offering positive interactions with a child while cup drinking is the best way to support this new learning process.

TIP 7:

Messy is OK. Cup drinking can be messy. But getting messy is healthy because it teaches children how liquids feel, widens their interests in trying more to drink and it prepares them for drinking independently.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Cup drinking is an exciting experience for a child, but sometimes it can be challenging. Knowing when a child is ready to try cup drinking and finding a cup that is a good match are essential to making mealtimes successful and enjoyable. When met with cup drinking challenges, seek out the support of others. Often, sharing past experiences, challenges and questions with other caregivers and team members can lead to greater problem-solving and creative solutions and alleviate caregiver and child distress.



For more information on cup drinking readiness, introduction of cups, and encouraging cup drinking, refer to Chapters 2 and 3.