

## 9I: GETTING CREATIVE WITH SEATING & SUPPLIES

Since children are constantly growing and developing, their needs are constantly changing. Specialized seating and other feeding related equipment can be expensive and not always accessible to caregivers. Therefore, it is important to be resourceful and creative to meet a child's feeding needs in safe and thoughtful ways.

The following are examples of creative feeding solutions found around the world. This is not a comprehensive list and should not be considered the only possibilities but, rather, a starting point for exploring solutions.

**POSITIONING:** Positioning is the most critical aspect of a child's feeding experience. Proper, safe positioning dramatically increases the safety and overall success of the child's ability to feed. Here are some common issues with positioning and a few creative ways to help address them:

### CHAIR IS TOO LARGE FOR THE CHILD

If the chair is too large for a child, they will not have solid trunk support. It is important to ensure a child has support on their back and both sides of their body to ensure they can obtain the key elements of positioning. You can help the child better fit in a too large chair by using padding between the child's body and the chair. Some possible padding options include:

- ⇒ Pillows
- ⇒ Cushions
- ⇒ Foam
- ⇒ Stuffed animals
- ⇒ Towels
- ⇒ Blankets



**Left Photo:** Caregivers use blankets and stuffed animals to make a large chair fit a smaller child's positioning needs.

**Right Photo:** Caregivers use cushions behind a child and under his feet to create a more supportive chair and position for this child.

## CHILD IS FALLING OVER IN CHAIR

Children may fall to either side, slump forward, or slide down while seated in a chair. It is important to ensure a child is able to maintain an upright, well-supported position in order to promote safe and successful mealtimes. You can help a child maintain an upright seated position by using padding between the child's body and the chair (as discussed previously) and by wrapping a belt or fabric around the child's trunk or hips and the chair. Some possible belt options include:

A belt made from:

- ⇒ A long scarf
- ⇒ Towel
- ⇒ Blanket
- ⇒ Fabric
- ⇒ Straps
- ⇒ Ropes



**Top Photo:** Caregivers use a piece of fabric tied around this girl and her chair to keep her hips in proper alignment for sitting.



**Left Photo:** Caregivers use a strap from a bathrobe around a boy and his chair to keep him from sliding down while seated.

## CHILD'S FEET DO NOT TOUCH THE FLOOR OR BOTTOM OF THE CHAIR

Children need firm footing when eating as a stable base of support and to make their body feel secure. When your feet are hanging and not grounded, it can feel uncomfortable or unsafe and require more effort to maintain a stable position for eating. Ideally, fitted feeding chairs will have an adjustable foot rest to support a child's feet properly. However, sometimes it can be difficult to find a chair where the child's feet can reach a solid surface such as a foot rest or the floor. You can help the child obtain proper foot support by modifying existing foot rests or creating your own. Some possible footrest and support options include:

- ⇒ Wooden blocks or planks
- ⇒ Crates
- ⇒ Boxes
- ⇒ Stacks of magazines (duct taped together), puzzle boards, foam mats, or anything thin, solid and stackable.
  - Try adjusting the stack of items to the height that fits the child and then tape the materials together for increased stability!
- ⇒ Short stools
- ⇒ Trash cans
- ⇒ Laundry baskets
- ⇒ The caregiver's legs

Caregivers adhered a wooden puzzle board to broken wheelchair foot rests using duct tape.



Caregivers use a small table and cushion as a foot rest for this child seated in a high chair.



## THE CHILD'S KNEES ARE TOO FAR APART OR TOO CLOSE TOGETHER

Twisted knees can hinder a child's ability to obtain the key elements of positioning. Ideally, fitted feeding chairs will have a bolster that goes between a child's legs to help maintain this position. However, sometimes it can be difficult to find a chair with this feature. You can help a child obtain proper knee support by modifying existing chairs or creating your own removeable substitutions. Some possible bolster options include:

- ⇒ Building a bolster into the chair
  - Drill a hole where the bolster should be and attach a short, padded post
  - Use professional carpenters for this approach
- ⇒ A rolled towel between or on the outside of the child's knees
- ⇒ A stuffed animal between or on the outside of the child's knees
- ⇒ Foam between or on the outside of the child's knees
  - Cover with fabric or pillow cases for easier clean up



**Left Photo: Caregivers insert a padded cushion between this boy's knees to support his comfort and positioning during meals.**

**Right Photo: Caregivers use pieces of foam inserted between this child's knees.**

## THE CHILD'S HEAD IS NOT SUPPORTED

When feeding, it is important that a child's head is upright, facing forward, with their chin slightly tucked. For some children, this requires extensive support as they cannot maintain this position on their own. Ideally, fitted feeding chairs will allow the child to reach this position. However, sometimes it can be difficult to find a chair with the proper head support for every child. Also, it is possible that even with proper head support, the child will need additional help keeping their head in position for an entire meal. Some possible head support options include:

- ⇒ A rolled towel or blanket wrapped around the child's neck with a loose rubber band to hold it in place
- ⇒ A travel pillow
- ⇒ Caregiver uses their arm to provide head and neck support



**Top Left Photo:** Caregivers use towels and a hair tie to create head and neck support for a child.

**Top Right Photo:** Caregivers use a travel pillow to support a child's head and neck positioning.

**Bottom Left Photo:** Caregivers use a blanket to support a child's trunk, head, and neck by wrapping it around his upper body.

*Things that DO NOT work for supporting a child's head positioning and can make it worse:*

- ∅ Tilting a child's head backwards
- ∅ Placing a hand on the child's forehead or face to hold it upright
- ∅ Forcibly holding a child's head in a position

## NO CHAIRS ARE AVAILABLE OR FIT THE NEEDS OF A CHILD

Finding a chair that suits each child's needs can be challenging. Further, sometimes even after modifying a chair, it still isn't appropriate for a child. Getting creative by making your own chairs can be a valuable and effective solution. Some possible chair options include:

- ⇒ Building chairs, tables, and trays with the help of community partners such as local carpenters
- ⇒ Creating chairs out of buckets or trash cans
  - Cut portions of the side out and insert cushioning for added support and comfort
- ⇒ Creating chairs, tables, and trays out of boxes
  - Cut portions of a cardboard box out and use duct tape to reinforce sides
  - Tape or adhere together milk boxes or other sturdy containers



Caregivers created a supportive seat made entirely out of milk boxes and tape.



**SELF FEEDING:** Helping a child learn how to feed themselves is an important step in development as well as a valuable life skill. This encourages a child to develop more skills and independence and reduces the burden for caregivers in the long run. However, not all children are able to use utensils and cups easily. Here is a common issue with self-feeding and a few creative ways to help address it:

### CHILD CANNOT HOLD ON TO UTENSILS AND CUPS OR HAS DIFFICULTY MOVING TO THEIR MOUTH

If a child has difficulty using their hands and arms, they may also have trouble grabbing, holding, and scooping food with utensils. Additionally, they may have difficulty holding onto cups. You can help a child learn to use utensils and cups with greater success by adapting current utensils and cups or making your own to fit their specific needs. Some possible adaption options include:

- ⇒ Using hair ties, rubber bands, or Velcro straps to attach to a utensil and a child's hand
- ⇒ Using tire rubber, wood, or tennis balls to attach to a utensil for easier grabbing and holding
- ⇒ Bending utensil handles to allow for easier self-feeding
- ⇒ Cutting plastic cups or bottles to make cut-out “nosey” cups
- ⇒ Making arm rockers out of wood, plastic, or foam
- ⇒ Adding handles to cups or bowls with the help of community partners such as local carpenters or potters



Caregivers use a Velcro strap around a young boy's hand and spoon which helps him hold on to it and feed himself.

*Look at a child's mobility challenges and physical strengths and develop ways to improve their feeding experience.*

*Getting creative helps us find new avenues for supporting the skills, development, and independence of every child.*

