



SECTION 1.6: SPOON FEEDING BASICS



WHAT IS SPOON FEEDING?

Spoon feeding is typically the first feeding step that a child experiences after breast or bottle feeding. Spoon feeding is usually introduced around 6 months old. This starting age is important because it's when a child has stronger muscles in her head, neck and trunk and she has learned to control her body for sitting and eating solid foods. At this age, children are also learning to bring objects to their mouths ("mouthing"), and they are exploring the world by mouthing everything. It's an exciting and important stage in a child's development.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF SPOON FEEDING?

Spoon feeding is important because:

- ① It is a primary step toward developing oral motor skills.
- ② It provides the chance to explore new textures.
- ③ It develops a child's sense of taste.
- ④ It assists with developing skills for cup drinking and chewing.
- ⑤ It is a fun and new experience and way for a child and caregivers to interact

| BENEFITS OF SPOON FEEDING | DESCRIPTIONS (WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE) |
|--|---|
| <p data-bbox="334 1339 509 1367">Oral Motor Skills</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaches children how to open and close their mouths ○ Teaches children how to remove food from a spoon using their lips ○ Teaches children how to move food around in the mouth using their tongues |
| <p data-bbox="305 1646 539 1673">Sensory Development</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Introduces new and different food flavors, textures, temperatures and thicknesses for developing taste |

Relationships and Language



- Provides children the chance to engage in meaningful interactions with caregivers
- Prepares children for social routines for mealtimes (hand washing, sitting to eat, taking turns, using language, following directions, etc.)

TYPICAL SPOON FEEDING TIMELINE: DEVELOPMENTAL STEPS FOR SPOON FEEDING⁹

There is a typical time frame (age range) for when a child learns to eat from a spoon. However, it is imperative to also consider a child's developmental skill level when deciding when to introduce spoons. Although a child may be a certain age, it is more important that he has the necessary skills in order to become successful eating from a spoon.



A child will show you when he is ready to eat from a spoon and which spoon works best.

Below are the typical developmental skills that support the process of learning to eat from a spoon and the developmental age at which they are often seen.

| DEVELOPMENTAL AGE | DEVELOPMENTAL SKILL |
|-------------------|--|
| 2 Months | Child can bring hands to mouth when on tummy |
| 3 Months | Child can bring hands to mouth when on back |
| 4 Months | Child can bring hands to mouth when holding objects |
| 9 Months | Child can hold and bang a spoon |
| 12-14 Months | Child can bring a spoon with food to mouth – will turn spoon over when moving to mouth |
| 15-18 Months | Child can scoop food onto a spoon and bring to mouth – some spilling |
| 24 Months | Child can feed himself from spoon with his palm of hand facing up |
| 31-32 Months | Child can feed himself well with minimal spilling |
| 30-36 Months | Child can use a fork to poke foods |



Learning to eat from a spoon takes practice and time. On average, children will master using a spoon by 2-3 years old. This means they will need extra support from caregivers for quite some time. Be patient.



TYPES OF SPOONS⁹

There are many different types of spoons of various shapes, sizes, styles and materials. Whatever the type of spoon chosen, it must match a child's mouth size and shape and her developmental needs. It's helpful for both caregivers and the child to understand the differences in order to make the best choice for every child.

SPOON SHAPES: WIDE AND NARROW; DEEP AND SHALLOW BOWLS

Spoons come in a variety of shapes, in particular, the bowl of the spoon can vary greatly. Spoons can have a wide or narrow bowl and the bowl can be shallow or deep. Deeper bowls require more effort and skill removing food from the spoon. Shallow bowls require less effort and skill and can be helpful when working with new feeders or children with poor oral motor skills. For example: A young child with a small mouth will have difficulty eating from an adult sized (wide and deep) bowl of a spoon. She will do better with a narrow and shallow bowl that fits her smaller mouth.



Top Photo (Left to Right): Narrow and Wide Spoons

Side Photos (Left to Right): Deep Bowl and Shallow Bowl of Spoons



When choosing a spoon, the shape of the bowl must match (fit) the size and shape of the child's mouth.

Select a handle that suits the primary feeder best.



SPOON SIZES: LONG AND SHORT HANDLES

Choosing a spoon with an appropriately sized handle depends on if the child is self-feeding or being fed by a caregiver. Smaller, child-sized handles can become tiring for caregivers to use, while longer handles can make aiming for the mouth more challenging for children feeding themselves. If both the caregiver and child are doing the feeding during a meal, try using two different sized spoons.



SPOON MATERIALS: METAL AND PLASTIC; HEAVY AND LIGHT

Spoons can be made of different materials (metal, plastic, coated). Children will often have a preference or need for a specific material. Although metal spoons are more durable, for children with sensitive mouths, the cold and hard feeling can be off-putting. Metal spoons are also heavier to hold and they can damage a child's gums or teeth if they bite down on them. Plastic spoons can be more comfortable for children and lighter when held, but they aren't as durable. They can also be dangerous for children with strong bite reflexes. Spoons with a coated bowl are helpful for children who are prone to biting or who are hypersensitive.



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

WHEN TO CLEAN AND REPLACE SPOONS

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

Young children enjoy feeding themselves using spoons that fit their smaller sized hands and mouths. When given the right spoons, feeding yourself becomes easier.

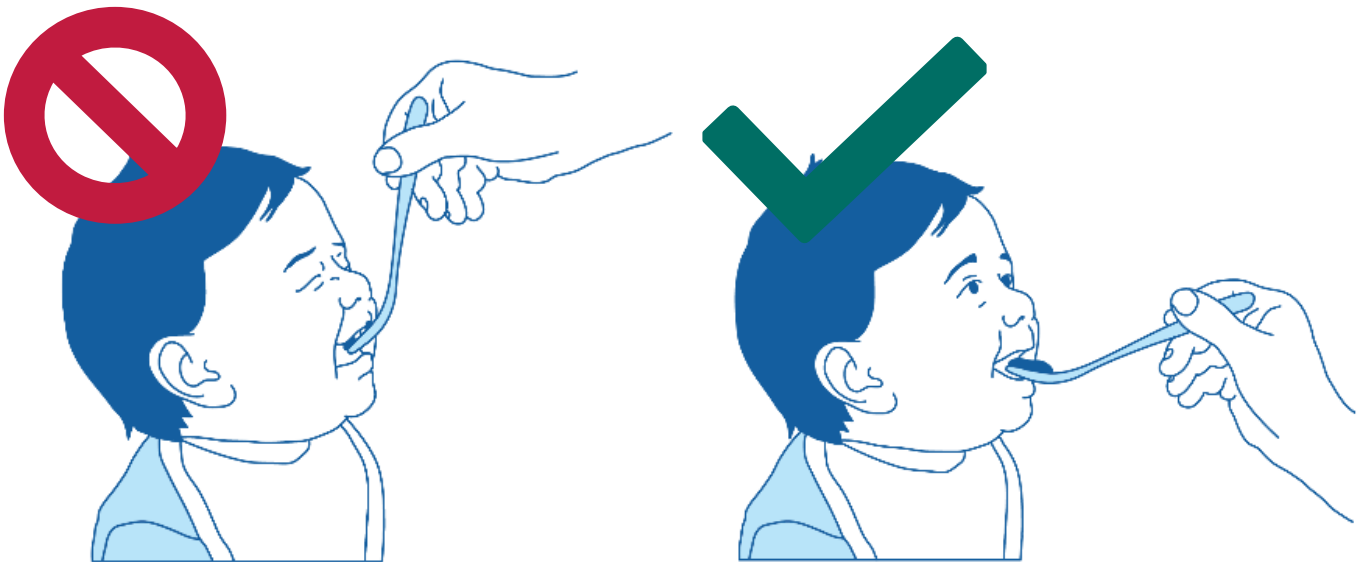


GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR SPOON FEEDING¹⁹

- **Step 1:** Introduce spoons when a child shows they are physically ready (sitting up and holding head and neck upright, of an appropriate age and is showing interest in spoons and solid foods).
- **Step 2:** Offer tastes of food on a pacifier or finger if introducing a spoon is challenging or upsetting to a child.
- **Step 3:** Hold the spoon 25 to 30cm (10-12 inches) from the child's face. Let him see the spoon and wait for him to open his mouth to show he is ready.
- **Step 4:** Place the spoon on the child's bottom lip and let him suck or remove the food off of the spoon.
- **Step 5:** Place the spoon in the middle of the child's tongue.
- **Step 6:** Let the child try to remove the food from the spoon using his lips. Or pull the spoon directly out of the child's mouth.



- *If a child is not interested or is distracted, do not force or slip the spoon into his mouth. This can lead to food refusals.*
- *Do not place food at the top of the child's mouth and scrape off onto the top lip or gums. This is not where food naturally goes. It does not allow the child to be an active eater, using his lips and tongue and cheeks to remove the food themselves.*
- *Do not place a spoon deep in a child's mouth. This can lead to gagging and vomiting.*
- *Do not scrape food off of a child's lips or face. This can lead to spoon feeding refusals because it doesn't feel good.*



Improper (left) and proper (right) spoon feeding technique

REMEMBER

- **It's ok if a child starts reaching for the spoon. Let him try to guide the spoon to his mouth.**
- **It's ok if a child gets messy during a mealtime! Clean up the mess afterward.**



KEY ELEMENTS OF SPOON FEEDING

| KEY ELEMENTS | SIGNS OF SUCCESSFUL SPOON FEEDING |
|---|---|
| <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 spoon, opening mouth for spoon, etc.) ○ Child is calm for feeding (not fussy) |
| <p>Appropriate Spoon (matches child's needs)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bowl of spoon fits comfortably and easily in child's mouth ○ Child comfortably and easily removes food from bowl – large amounts of food aren't left on spoon after bites ○ Child is not overly sensitive to spoon material and is not flinching, gagging, pulling away, etc. ○ Handle and weight of spoon are comfortable for caregiver and allow child to hold, scoop, lift and bring toward mouth when she begins feeding herself |
| <p>Appropriate Pacing</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregiver offers child ample time to take bites off of spoon before removing from her mouth ○ Caregiver offers child ample time to swallow bites before introducing another ○ Feeding takes 30 minutes or less |
| <p>Appropriate Foods</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is offered foods thinned with liquids when first learning to eat from a spoon ○ Child is gradually offered different food textures as she becomes more skilled eating from a spoon ○ Child is offered foods that stick to a spoon as she begins practicing feeding herself |
| <p>Appropriate Bite Sizes</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is offered small bites when she first begins eating from a spoon (1/2 teaspoon per bite) ○ Child is gradually offered larger bites as she becomes more skilled eating from a spoon |



SPOON FEEDING TIPS FOR EVERY CHILD

TIP 1:

Not every child will do well with the same spoon. Consider children's individual needs. Finding the best spoon can sometimes take a lot of work. Even a child who is typically developing, may need to try several spoons 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 spoon. Do not only consider a child's age when thinking about introducing spoons. Children need to be able to sit upright and have good head and neck control.

TIP 3:

Eating from a spoon takes time and practice. Learning to eat food from a spoon 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 (and often messy) practice.

TIP 4:

Good positioning is key. Finding a safe and comfortable position for a child who is spoon feeding is critical. A stable position will also make self-feeding much easier.

TIP 5:

Start small and slow. Keep bite sizes on the small side and use a slower rate of feeding during meals — especially when first introducing spoons to a child. The slower the rate and the smaller the bites, the easier and safer it will be for a child to eat and swallow. Remember, when a child first learns to eat from a spoon, bottle or breastfeeding will continue to be their primary source of nutrition.

TIP 6:

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

TIP 7:

Messy is OK. Spoon feeding can be messy. But getting messy is healthy because it teaches children how foods feel, widens their interests in trying foods and prepares them for feeding themselves.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Spoon feeding is a child's first opportunity to explore solid foods. Eating is a rich sensory experience, and the first tastes, smells and touches of foods can be fun and thrilling for a child. Knowing when a child is ready to try spoon feeding and finding a spoon that is a good match are essential to making mealtimes successful and enjoyable.

Remember, when met with spoon feeding 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, alleviating any caregiver and child distress.

For more information on spoon feeding readiness, introducing spoons, and encouraging spoon feeding, refer to Chapters 2 and 3 and Appendices 9H and 9L-3.