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The independent eater

Motor skills

Your tot doesn't just use their motor skills to move, they're also important for trying new foods. Here's what your little one is learning right now:

- Moving foods side-to-side in their mouth more often.
- Getting better at chewing.
- Licking their lips.
- Dipping foods.
- Using a few fingers to pick up food rather than their whole hand.

Self-feeding

While your cutie is on track to self-feed soon, they may still need your help to get there. If your little one seems like they're ready to eat by themselves, these ideas should help:

- Start with 2 spoons—you hold one and they hold the other. They'll learn by watching you eat with yours. They might try to grab your spoon, but go ahead and let them.
- Toddler-friendly utensils and plates are best. Spoons should have soft, big handles so it's easy for little hands to grip. Plates should have curved sides so your little one can scoop food along the edges.
- Patience pays off. They'll make a mess learning, but resist the urge to just feed them yourself (we know, it's tempting).
- Start with foods that easily stay on spoons so your tot doesn't get frustrated too often.
- Do not use disposable plastic spoons or forks—they break easily, can have sharp, scratchy edges and are a choking hazard.

If your tot is using their fingers to feed themselves:

- Try giving them developmentally appropriate, easy-to-pick up foods. Diced bananas, meat sticks and bite-sized snacks are all great choices.
- Avoid choking hazards like popcorn, whole grapes, hot dogs, nuts, gum or hard candy.

If your little one is learning how to use silverware or cups:

- Show them thick foods that won't fall off the spoon—holding a spoon level might be hard for them at this stage.
- Try bite-sized foods they can eat with a fork, like soft, diced fruit.
- Use bowls that are shallow with large openings to offer easy access to finger feed.

The importance of chewing

We all chew our food, and your kiddo's no different. But it's really so much more than that. Chewing also:

- Stimulates jaw muscles to break down food.
- Makes swallowing easier because food is in smaller pieces.
- Mixes food with saliva before it gets to the stomach.
- Releases flavors.

Finding what they like

Your tot likes certain foods after seeing the same ones over and over. The more you offer it, the better the chance is they'll like it. It may seem like a losing battle when they 'yuck' at a food over and over again, but learning to enjoy different foods just takes a little time. Re-offering foods in a positive way is a good way to make progress, so keep trying. Encourage them by eating the food yourself while smiling and saying things like "yum". Slowly but surely, they'll get the message.

Remember, while you decide what's on their plate, they decide what, and how much, they want. It can feel weird at first to leave food on their plate, but it will help them understand hunger and fullness later on.

The right food at the right time

New food is exciting, but introducing new textures, shapes and sizes of food should be based around your kiddo's individual needs. Watch your child for readiness cues and follow their skill development to offer the right textures when they're ready.