

Teaching Blind Children Self-Feeding Skills¹

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Children who are blind or visually impaired discover their world through touch, sound and taste. If your little one is blind, he doesn't have the advantage of casually observing and learning from family and friends. Skills such as self-feeding should be taught in a structured way, according to Amber Bobnar, administrator of WonderBaby.org, a website funded by Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, and designed to help parents of visually impaired children. Bobnar's 7-year-old son Ivan is blind, and she created the site when he was 1 year old. Mealtimes provide the backdrop for many social experiences - birthday parties, weddings, family gatherings and school lunchtimes. Teach your child ways to adapt to his visual impairment, and he won't feel isolated when mealtimes roll around. Take small steps when you teach your child to self-feed.

Manageable Goals

When you begin to teach your child to self-feed, set specific goals, recommends Bobnar. "I want my daughter to feed herself," for instance, is a vague goal. Be specific: "I want my daughter to hold a spoon and get it to her mouth." Setting small goals reduces frustration for you and your child. Praise your little one often when she meets even the smallest challenge.

¹ <https://mom.me/baby/27660-teaching-blind-children-self-feeding-skills/>



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Fine-Motor Coordination

In order for a child to eat with his fingers or a utensil, he must first understand how his hands work. Provide opportunities for playing with toys of different textures and sizes, such as small, round blocks, long, skinny pegs and a pegboard and smooth and bumpy toys, suggests Bobnar. These activities strengthen grasp and fine-motor skills. When your child takes apart stackable rings, he learns to manipulate and use his hands. "Let him hold the objects long enough to bring them to his mouth," recommends Bobnar. Supervise him closely.

Finger Foods

A child's first experience with self-feeding is typically finger foods. Offer your little one treats, such as puffs, every day. Give her the opportunity to touch and play with the puffs. Find ways to encourage your child to handle the food. "One trick we found to help Ivan get used to touching the sticky puffs was to bury his hand in a big mound of puffs. He thought it was funny," says Bobnar. This helps ease the transition from playing with food to grasping it and bringing it to the mouth.

Find a comfortable position for your child when she eats finger foods. If she sits on the floor with puffs in front of her, the long distance requires a mature grasp. Bobnar says the best option she found was a first years' feeding tray, recommended by her physical therapist. It is low to the ground, so her son's feet were on the floor and his knees bent at a 90-degree angle. The tray is at elbow level. Place a cloth on the tray so the food items don't roll around too much.

Sensitivity

Desensitize your child's hands to gooey textures. Many blind kids don't like the feeling of being sticky or dirty, and this can hinder their ability to pick up finger foods. Bobnar encouraged her son to play with sticky substances such as pudding and whipped cream. If your child gets over this tactile defensiveness, it's easier for him to learn to feed himself.

To improve your child's hand sensitivity, play fun games that involve clapping or swinging the hands. Occupational therapists often recommend the Wilbarger Brushing Protocol, a therapy program designed to reduce sensory or tactile defensiveness, as part of an overall, sensory diet. "We made sure to use the brush on Ivan's hands. It's helpful to use this technique right before an activity that might be difficult for your child in terms of motor skills," adds Bobnar.

Utensils and Dishes

Visually impaired children should start using utensils around the same time as their sighted peers. In her webcast for Perkins School for the Blind, occupational therapist, Sue Shannon, recommends starting with a spoon and eventually transitioning to a "spork" and then a fork. A wider-grip works best. You can buy adaptive or customized utensils from rehabilitation and



medical-supply companies. Your child will grasp the utensil with his fist at first. Although this grip doesn't provide much control, it works fine when he's eating foods made of sticky substances. When he learns to use his fingers to grip the utensil, he'll experience more control.

"When I first used utensils, I often took empty bites, especially when the amount of food on the plate lessened. It helps to have a border on the dish," says Tracy Andersen, an independent adult who's been blind since the age of 3. Use bowls or plates with significant rims. "My Plate-Mate" hooks onto any dish and provides a barrier around the dish to prevent food from sliding off. Eventually, you can teach your child to use bread or a roll to aid in scooping.

Drinks

When you pour a drink into your child's cup, teach him to determine when the cup is full. "I place my index finger about an inch into the cup. When the liquid hits the tip of my finger, I know the cup is full," says Andersen. You can also buy a liquid level indicator if your child is sensitive to touch.

Hand Guidance

Your child might be hesitant to perform a task such as using a utensil or drinking from a cup. She might be more comfortable learning it if she's touching your hands at first, rather than the material or object. Show her how to do new tasks by using the "hand-under-hand" or the "hand-over-hand" technique. As you perform the task, verbally describe what you are doing.

With the hand-under-hand method, your child's hands rest on top of yours, so she can feel how your hands move. In the hand-over-hand method, your child performs the task and you rest your hand on top of hers for guidance. She'll feel more secure knowing you're there to lend support.

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