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# How to Prepare Your Child for Eating

Feeding is a multi-sensory experience and can be overwhelming for some children. They may be fearful of food and may limit what they eat to just a few familiar foods. There are a lot of ways we can help a child prepare for eating, even before any food gets to the mouth. Here are a few ideas.

## Help your child learn about mealtimes

- If possible, include your child in shopping and any food preparation. This can be as simple as holding a spoon.
- Even if your child isn't eating food yet, they can become more comfortable with food by watching family members eat. Mealtimes are about eating, but they are also a time to enjoy each others company.
- Have a beginning and ending ritual to meals, like washing hands, and setting and cleaning the table.
- Serve food family style with everyone passing the food and serving themselves. Help your child to serve food onto their plate. (Some children do not tolerate food directly in front of them. If this is the case, your child's plate can be pushed back or a small second plate can be used for nonpreferred foods.)



## Help your child tolerate food in front of them

- When your child is sitting at the table with you, talk about the food. Even if your child does not interact or taste the food, remind them what was served. You can say, "We had applesauce, carrots and chicken for dinner."

## Help your child tolerate the smell of food

- Have your child nearby during food preparation. If the smells are overwhelming for your child, you can use a small fan that will help move the smell away.
- At meals or snacks, bring a small amount of food up to your child to smell. Model how to smell the food first and then offer your child to take a turn.

## Help your child tolerate the touch of food

- Please use the "Steps to Eating" on the next page to help your child practice interacting with food. Please don't force your child. We want to build trust with them as they tolerate all of the sensations.
- Offer an empty spoon at meals for a child to get use to the spoon before any food is offered.
- If you child is in a highchair, put a small amount of food directly on the tray for him to look at, touch and smell.

### To Learn More

- Occupational and Physical Therapy  
206-987-2113
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

## Steps to Eating

### 1 Tolerates

- Being in the same room
- Being at the table with the food on the other side of the table
- Being at the table with the food halfway across the table
- Being at the table with the food approximately in front of child
- Looks at food when directly in front of food

### 2 Interacts with

- Helps prepare/set up food
- Uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink
- Uses utensils or a container to serve self

### 3 Smells

- Odor in room
- Odor at table
- Odor directly in front of child
- Leans down or picks up to smell

### 4 Touches

- Fingertips, fingerpads
- Whole hand
- Lips
- Teeth
- Tip of tongue, full tongue

### 5 Tastes

- Licks lips, tongue licks food
- Bites off piece & spits out immediately
- Bites pieces, holds in mouth for "x" seconds & spits out
- Bites, chews "x" times & spits out
- Chews, partially swallows
- Chews, swallows with drink

### 6 Eats

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Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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