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Children & Families

Speech & Language Therapy

Supporting Feeding in Children
with Down Syndrome (6
months+)

Why do children with Down's Syndrome sometimes have difficulties with eating and drinking?

Children with Down's Syndrome typically have low or 'floppy' muscle tone. This not only affects the muscles of the arms and legs but also causes the muscles in the neck, face and mouth to be weaker as well. Feeding problems associated with low muscle tone may include:

- ❑ Difficulty latching on to the breast or teat.
- ❑ The mouth may be less alert or ready for feeding.
- ❑ Problems with moving on to spoon feeds and different food textures.
- ❑ Some children who have been enjoying smooth solids can get stuck at the next stage (around 7-9 months) when lumpier foods are introduced. They may spit out lumps; gag on them and some children may even vomit. There are a number of reasons this may occur including: prematurity, medical, physical or sensory difficulties or immature tongue movements.
- ❑ It is important to consider your child's overall development when thinking about their eating and drinking.
- ❑ Your SLT will help explain possible reasons as to why your child is having some difficulties and will work with you to help build your child's acceptance of lumpier foods.

Other Considerations –



Seating: Be sure your child is in a well supported sitting position – a chair or high chair will offer more support than sitting on your lap. It is important that their head is well supported.

Temperature: Chilled foods generally tend to have less odour than warmed foods and may therefore be more readily accepted.

Make it fun: Mealtimes can become stressful, try and keep calm during mealtimes as your child will sense this. Never bribe your child to eat.

Be a good model: Try and offer your child foods at the same time the rest of the family are eating. Offer small tastes of your meals (unseasoned and at the correct consistency) if your child shows interest.

Keep persevering: Research suggests that parents may need to offer their child the same food 12-14 times before they will accept it. However, many parents give up after 3-4 attempts. Be patient and keep trying.

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Spoon Feeding:



- ❑ Try offering the spoon to the side of the mouth. This will help your child learn to move their tongue around more in their mouth. This is important in developing early chewing skills.
- ❑ Don't empty the spoon into your child's mouth and don't pull the spoon out. Wait for your child's lips to close to let the mouth do the work. You want your child to be as active as possible while feeding. This is especially important for children with Down syndrome who often have poor muscle tone in the lips.
- ❑ Children with Down syndrome tend to push food out with their tongue. Putting food into the side of the mouth may reduce this.

Increasing Textures:

Many commercially available foods move from smooth purées to lumpy consistencies with irregular sized and shaped lumps which can be more difficult for a child to manage, meaning they spit lumps out. Homemade foods generally have more texture.

- ❑ As a first step: try adding some thickening agent, e.g. baby rice/cereal, instant potato, etc into runnier smooth purées. This will give your child opportunities to experience a different sensation and require them to use their tongues more to manipulate the food without the challenge of lumps.



- ❑ Gradually introduce small soft lumps of the same size in the thick, ground food, e.g. mashed banana, avocado, fork mashed vegetables, small soft pasta lumps. Avoid vegetables that have an outer husk, e.g. peas, corn, etc until your child is able to tolerate more lumps.

- ❑ Gradually add more lumps
- ❑ Introduce changes slowly so that your child has time to build tolerance at each level and always move on to the next stage using foods your child enjoys.

Promoting Self Feeding:



- ❑ Allow your child to play with a spoon and attempt to feed themselves.
- ❑ Exploring: Let your child experiment and play with foods. Although this can be messy, it can give your child a greater sense of control over what they are eating. It is an important part of normal development for children to be able to pick up foods and squash them between their fingers before taking a lick or taste.
- ❑ Encourage finger feeding with appropriate foods. Start with 'bite and dissolve' foods (e.g. 'organix', 'wotsits', 'kiddylicious smoothie melts').
- ❑ Move slowly onto foods that are easily chewed e.g. well cooked vegetables, peeled ripe pear.
- ❑ It is important to take into account your child's developmental stage.

Cup Drinking:

- ❑ It is good to introduce a cup at around 7 months.
- ❑ Cup drinking develops the muscles of the jaw, cheeks, lips and tongue. Fast flowing liquids may be difficult to control at first.
- ❑ At 7 months, babies are using a forward- backward tongue movement so if they are having difficulties with the fast flow of liquid you could thicken it slightly with fruit puree or a little baby rice in milk.
- ❑ Place the cup on the lower lip; wait for your child to take small sips rather than pouring the liquid in. Make sure the tongue isn't under the cup.
- ❑ Support your child under the chin with thumb and forefingers if they find it difficult to close their mouth around the cup.
- ❑ When moving on from bottle, you could try a cup with an inverted lid, a straw (honey bear straw cup) or a cup with a slanted lip (like the red doidy cup). See below :



General Tips –

- ❑ Mouth Play:
 - ❑ Baby's own fingers and toes! These are always readily available and an endless source of amusement to your baby. At a young age the typical infant will discover hands and watch them with great interest. This is the first 'mouth toy' a child should be introduced to because it promotes sensory development of both hands and mouth and is a gentle introduction to oral stimulation.
 - ❑ Mouthing of toys can help you introduce your child to different textures and sensations in their mouths without the pressure of managing to swallow food as well. Objects such as commercially available teething toys, toothbrushes, spoons, soft toys, chewy tubes can be tried with supervision. The mouthing toy can be dipped into a tasty purée such as yoghurt, so that your child makes the connection between food and chewing.
- ❑ Play with your child while looking in the mirror together and talk about the faces you make e.g. where is your nose? blow kisses, make noises. Research has shown that babbling during mirror play increases a child's attempts at sound making.
- ❑ Rubber or soft plastic spoons make great toys because the child can hold them easily and they introduce the child to the idea of self- feeding.
- ❑ Making mouth play fun and interesting plus plenty of touching and kissing on the face, cheeks and lips should ensure that your baby develops good oral skills and does not become hypersensitive around their mouth.

