

Feeding Milestones: Birth to 5

What to expect at each age - and how to grow a happy, confident eater

Birth-4 months

all liquid, all snuggles

- Feeds only on breast milk or formula; coordinates suck-swallow-breathe
- Roots toward the breast/bottle and shows hunger cues (stirring, hands to mouth, fussing)
- Brings hands to mouth by around 3 months - early self-feeding practice!

4-6 months

getting ready for food

- Shows readiness signs: steady head control, sits with little support, watches and reaches for your food
- Tongue-thrust reflex (pushing food out) fades
- Around 6 months: first tastes of smooth purees or very soft mashed foods - one new food at a time

6-9 months

purees to lumps and bumps

- Moves from smooth purees to thicker, mashed, and lumpy textures
- Opens mouth for the spoon and uses upper lip to clear it
- Starts soft, meltable finger foods (~8 months): puffs, well-cooked veggie pieces, soft fruit
- Early up-and-down munching; begins sips from an open or straw cup with help

9-12 months

little self-feeder

- Picks up small bites with thumb and fingertip (pincer grasp) and feeds himself/herself
- Eats a growing variety of soft table foods cut small; chewing gets stronger
- Bites through soft foods; moves food side to side in the mouth
- Drinks from an open or straw cup with help; bottle feeds start to decrease

12-18 months

table food toddler

- Eats mostly table foods - ideally what the family eats, cut safely
- Weans from the bottle (aim by ~12-15 months); drinks from a straw or open cup
- Dips and scoops with a spoon - messy is normal and important!
- Appetite naturally slows as growth slows - smaller portions are expected

18-24 months

practicing utensils (and opinions!)

- Uses a spoon with less spilling; starts stabbing with a fork
- Chews a wide range of textures with rotary (grinding) chewing
- Drinks well from an open cup
- "Picky" phase often begins - food neophobia (wariness of new foods) is developmentally normal

2-3 years

confident eater, choosy eater

- Feeds self a full meal with fork and spoon
- Manages most family-meal textures; drinks from an open cup without help
- Picky eating often peaks - keep offering without pressure; appetite varies day to day
- Sits at the table for 10-15 minutes; enjoys helping wash, stir, and pour

3-4 years

family meals for real

- Eats the family menu with few modifications; accepts new foods after many gentle exposures
- Serves self from shared bowls; pours from a small pitcher; starts spreading with a dull knife
- Uses a napkin, stays seated through most of a meal, and chats while eating

4-5 years

independent at the table

- Uses fork and spoon neatly; spreads and begins cutting soft foods with a knife
- Eats a reasonable variety across food groups (some strong preferences are still normal)
- Helps plan and prepare simple meals - kids eat what they help make!
- Manages a lunchbox: opens containers, unwraps, and paces themselves

Ages are approximate - healthy eaters develop along a range. Always cut food safely (no whole grapes, nuts, or hot dog rounds under 4) and supervise all meals.

Signs it's time to check in with an OT or feeding therapist

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| ! Coughing, choking, gagging, or watery eyes at most meals | ! Refusing entire food groups or textures (e.g., nothing soft, nothing crunchy) |
| ! A wet or gurgly voice during/after eating or drinking | ! Crying, arching, or battles at most meals; mealtimes regularly over 30-40 minutes |
| ! Stuck on purees past about 10-12 months, or great difficulty moving up in texture | ! Still fully bottle- or purée-dependent past 18-24 months |
| ! Pocketing food in cheeks, spitting food out consistently, or swallowing food whole | ! Poor weight gain, or a doctor's concern about growth |
| ! Fewer than ~20 accepted foods, or dropping foods without picking up new ones | ! Family can't eat together or eat out because of the child's eating |

One tough meal doesn't mean trouble - look for patterns over weeks, not days.

Raising a happy eater: what helps at every age

- **Division of responsibility:** you decide *what, when, and where* food is offered - your child decides *whether and how much* to eat.
- **Keep exposures low-pressure:** it can take 10-15+ relaxed tries before a new food is accepted. Touching, smelling, and licking all count as progress.
- **Serve one "safe" food** your child reliably eats alongside anything new.
- **Eat together when you can** - children learn to eat by watching you eat.
- **Let them get messy and help cook.** Food play builds food confidence.
- **Skip the pressure, bribes, and "just one bite" rules** - they tend to backfire and increase resistance.

Feeding is our favorite thing at Eat Play Love OT

If mealtimes feel stressful, or your gut says something is off, you don't have to wait it out. Reach out anytime - lindsey@eatplayloveot.com - and we'll figure it out together.

Adapted from CDC, AAP, and pediatric feeding-development references. Educational only - not a substitute for evaluation or medical advice.