

The Importance of Tactile Exploration for Feeding

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Teaching a baby how to eat and enjoy food is a fun and exciting milestone for many parents. It is essential for us as parents to be patient, to allow our baby to take the lead, and to see our baby's food as much more than a way to satisfy hunger. Food and the act of feeding can and should be a pleasurable learning tool for parents to share with their child.

We begin introducing solids by spoon feeding cereals and then veggies and fruits. A baby needs time to get used to how these new textures feel inside of her mouth as well as how to manage and swallow them. She may make a face and push the food out of her mouth with her tongue. As she becomes more comfortable with management of her smooth food, she will then probably begin to reach for the spoon to practice her ability to reach and grasp. This will allow her to explore what is going into her mouth with her hands. It is around this time as well that your baby may experiment with blowing raspberries during spoon feeds to further explore her abilities. Mom and Dad may want to start donning a raincoat to avoid wearing the baby's lunch!

As your baby gets older and her diet expands it is very important to give your baby an opportunity for "messy play" and exploration of a variety of tastes and textures with her hands and mouth. Mealtime for a baby is much more than meeting caloric needs. While sitting in a highchair your baby is able to practice a wide range of skills. For example, by placing a spoonful of baby carrots onto her tray she is able to handle and play with it while smelling it and getting used to how it feels on her hands. She may even bring her hand to her mouth to taste the carrots. This is the initial step to self-feeding! You can further facilitate her skill acquisition by providing her with her own spoon or a toy that she can dip into food to bring to her mouth.

Typically between 7 and 9 months your baby will be ready to explore meltable crunchies such as puffs, baked corn snacks, graham crackers, etc as well as small pieces of soft cooked veggies. Placing these finger foods onto her tray will give her the opportunity to practice using her thumb and index finger to pick them up. Don't be surprised if she initially plays with this food on her tray by squeezing it between her fingers or spreading it out on her tray. There is a very good chance she will also throw it on the floor and look to see where it falls. It is suggested that a child be presented with a particular food at least 10 to 15 times to become comfortable with it and determine whether or not it is a preferred food. Although your dining room may look like the stage of a food fight try not to forget that this opportunity to explore and play with food is an integral part of learning how to eat and self-feed.

There are a few ways to make your life easier during this messy play phase. If it's warm outside, take advantage and feed your baby on the porch or in the backyard. If your child is prone to ripping off her bib, use an inexpensive large shirt to cover her clothes or let her go shirtless. You can also place something underneath her highchair to catch food such as newspaper, old cloth, or plastic. It is okay to wait until the end of the day to clean up the baby's feeding area so that you are not cleaning for each meal. If it helps, remind yourself that all phases pass and your child will eventually strive to use utensils and eat neater to be "a big girl like her mommy".

When it comes to your baby's mealtime remain patient, let your child take the lead, and consider "messy play" and food exploration an important part of learning how to eat and self-feed. If you are able to do this, you are helping your child establish a healthy relationship with food. Congratulations!

by Kate Molyneaux, OT