

FEEDING AND EATING

Chewing practice

Speech Pathology

Some children find chewing foods difficult. This might simply be because they haven't had enough practice with foods other than purées. Some children might gag, refuse or spit out chewy solids or lumps. Chewing is a skill that children learn with practice such as mouthing objects and foods. Early chewing is usually established between 6 and 9 months of age. Exposure and practice with different textures of food between 6 and 10 months old may help a child accept a larger range of different foods as they get older.

Teeth or no teeth

There are many steps to learning to chew. Children can practise these skills before they have teeth.

Some ideas to help develop chewing skills

No teeth: early chewing skills

- Give a gum-brush or training toothbrush to practise munching.
- Give 'hard munchable' foods such as a rusk or a whole uncooked carrot for her to mouth.

- Use a gum-brush, training toothbrush, your finger, or your child's finger to move food to the side of her mouth to practise chewing.
- Give long, thick strips of very chewy foods (e.g. crusty bread, or dried strips of mango). Show her how to hold the food and move her jaw up and down. Help her hold the food on her back gums.
- Practise chewing with foods that **dissolve**. These are foods that melt in the mouth with saliva so are easier to swallow (e.g. wafer or baby rice cracker).

Always supervise your child **closely** to make sure she does not bite whole pieces off.

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Teeth for chewing: when your child has developed some early chewing skills

- Cut soft foods into bite sized pieces.
- Help your child place pieces of food into the side of her mouth, between the teeth, ready for chewing.
- Begin with soft chewy foods (e.g. cheese sticks or scrambled egg) and then move to more difficult foods (e.g. soft vegetables, pasta and finely chopped meats).
- Start introducing chewy foods that your child likes and then gradually introduce new foods.
- Let your child watch other children eating chewy foods—children learn eating skills from other children.

Offering new, chewy foods

Offer food in a 'mesh bag feeder' (a bag with a netted pouch—available in supermarkets, department stores or pharmacies). Give the mesh feeder to the child at the front or side of her mouth for her to chew. This is one way to give new foods, textures and flavours if your child is cautious.

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