

Feeding is nurturing

From those first days home as a parent, you'll be making feeding decisions that will help your precious baby grow into a healthy toddler. Whether baby is breast- or bottle-fed, plenty of eye contact, soft lights and gently stroking baby's skin provides her with the loving touch that is as important to the feeding experience as the nutrition she gets.

Transition 1: First bottle

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages breast-feeding through the first year, since there are so many proven health-related benefits to baby. The reality is that most breastfeeding mothers at some time turn to a bottle in order to share the feeding experience with other family members. Anticipating the optimal time to introduce the first bottle can ease this first transition. Experts recommend waiting for your milk supply to be fully established and baby is nursing well (around 4 weeks).

Parents today have many feeding accessories to make feeding time easier. Choice of the appropriate breastpump for you --- whether manual or electric, single or double, can make all the difference in those early weeks. A bottle warmer can heat a cool bottle right in the nursery to keep you comfortably close. Select lightweight, slim bottle designs to help baby hold the bottle on her own. Many experts believe a nipple that's most like mom's breast is your best bet, but babies vary in their preferences. Bottles and nipples should be sterilized or sanitized before you use them.

Transition 2: Bottle to cup

Learning to use a cup is a big deal for babies 6 months and up. Expect it to take weeks to months for your little one to adjust to the changes involved as she moves from the familiar sucking motion of a nipple to the new skills needed to master a sippy cup valve or straw drinking. Look for cups that are appropriately sized for her hand, lightweight enough to lift, and grasp-friendly. Many parents expect handles in first cups, but our research at The First Years taught us something interesting: first time cup users often tried to hold the cup like a bottle and the handles interfered with their grasp. This insight led us to create an indented, handles-free Take and Toss L'il Learner cup that teaches babies how to grip, tip and sip successfully in a much shorter time!

Transition 3: Independent feeding

As your child becomes more active and independent, feeding will move from your lap to her own feeding seat or highchair. Safety, of course, is a priority, so look for seats with comfortable but sturdy restraint straps. Features such as portability and ease of cleaning are a plus, as mealtime becomes increasingly independent (and messy!). Here are a few self-feeding tips:

- o Once you introduce solids (usually between 4 & 6 months), give baby her own spoon. This encourages her natural wish to imitate and lets her practice her grasp and coordination. Even if she just chews on the spoon, she'll make the link between a utensil and mealtime.

o Introduce small amounts of new foods one at a time, alongside tried and true flavors. Experts recommend waiting 3 days between introducing the next new food to make any allergic sensitivities clear. This way baby also gets multiple chances to adjust to a new food's texture or flavor.

Transition 4: Toddler mealtime

It's a challenge for a toddler to sit through a prolonged meal. All those new smells, tastes and social distractions make it hard to focus. Add to this equation a toddler's need to move, short attention span and desire to control her world, and you have quite a stage for potential conflict. A few helpful strategies to make mealtime more enjoyable:

Maintain routines:

Keep feeding routines the same no matter where your child is eating—at home, daycare, or in a restaurant. Toddlers are big on the concept of “mine”. The same seat, the same dishes and cups are reassuring signs that even though she's in a “strange place”, she can reliably count on the same eating experience.

Involve your child:

Make your child feel like a “big kid”. Let her help carry items to the table, buckle her strap if she can and wipe her own face at meal's end. These kinds of habits are ones you want her to do for herself eventually, so start now.

Make it fun!

Mealtime is a wonderful chance to shut out the outside world (including TV) and focus on building baby's skills. Try to see the inevitable mess (dipping, spilling, and smearing) as positive proof that your little one is enjoying feeding time.

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