



Developing Language Skills at Mealtimes

Mealtimes can provide lots of opportunities to develop your child's speech and language skills. You can find some suggestions below.

- **Making Choices.** Ask your child to help with planning meals. Offer verbal choices while holding up the food options for visual support. Would she like pasta or rice? Cereal or toast? An apple or a banana? Would she like two grapes, or three grapes?
- **Basic vocabulary.** Name the foods you and your child are eating, or see if he can remember the names of foods. Talk about what different family members are eating. Talk about what you might eat for different meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner, for a birthday, on a picnic, etc.). Talk about the foods that different types of animals might eat.
- **Adjectives.** To extend basic vocabulary, talk about the colour and size of the food. Compare sizes of foods (which is big/bigger – a potato or a pea?). Can your child match foods that are the same colour – such as a carrot and an orange; a tomato and a red apple; a cucumber and some broccoli? Ask your child to describe how the food tastes or smells. Is it a crunchy apple or a smooth mushroom? Is it a hot pizza or a cold icecream? Is it a sweet cake or a savoury sausage? Is it yummy, tasty, delicious? When you stir the soup or chop the vegetables, ask your child if you should stir/chop 'fast' or 'slow'?
- **Verbs.** You can encourage your child to use new verbs (with support from the family). Start when you are preparing the food. Are you peeling, cutting, chopping, stirring, pouring, mixing, cooking, baking? When you are eating the food, you can talk about biting, nibbling, chewing and crunching. There are lots of verbs linked to food – maybe your family can think of some more!

National Office

Langdon Down Centre,
2a Langdon Park, Teddington,
Middlesex, TW11 9PS
Reg Company No. 3310024 (England & Wales)

Down's Syndrome Association

t. 0333 1212 300
f. 020 8614 5127
e. info@downs-syndrome.org.uk
w. www.downs-syndrome.org.uk



- **Categories.** A category is the bigger group that an item belongs to. For example, a banana is a fruit; and a sausage is meat. You can pick a food category and see how many items you can think of for that group. Look at the food you are eating. Can your child find a vegetable? Some meat? A fruit? Something sweet? Something savoury?
- **Likes and dislikes.** It is good to be able to talk about what we like and don't like. We can also learn to explain why. Do we not like the taste/flavour or texture? Do we love the smell? Talk about what types of food family members and friends like or don't like. It's good to learn to express opinions and understand that we don't all like the same things.
- **Instructions and Number.** Ask your child to help with making the food and getting everything ready. You can use simple instructions with signed support, such as 'where's the table?', working towards more complex instructions such as 'please get knives and forks for everyone and set the table'. Ask your child to count how many people are in your family and see if she can tell you how many forks she will need to set the table. Give her too few forks, and support her to ask for 'more forks please'; or ask her to tell you how many more forks she needs (depending on her language level). Give her too many spoons and ask her how many spoons are left when she has finished setting the table.
- **Speech Sounds.** You can clap the syllables of different foods - e.g. 'cheese' (one clap); 'pasta' (two claps); 'cucumber' (three claps). Talk about the initial (first) sounds of different foods. To make this task more visual, cut out pictures of different foods, or use real foods, and see if your child can match them to their initial sounds. For example, write the letters 'p' and 'c' on separate sheets of paper, and see if he can match pear, pasta, pizza, pineapple, porridge, etc. to the 'p'; and cake, carrot, cucumber, cabbage, cookie, etc. to the 'c'.

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- **Social Skills.** Sit down together for meals. Turn off the TV, computer, iPad, phones. Take turns to tell each other something you have enjoyed during the day. Support your child to say 'I like.....', or to ask and answer questions, using sign if appropriate.

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