


Developmental stages in infant & toddler feeding

As a parent you will naturally want to know what to expect in your child's development. You might wonder when you'll see them develop certain feeding and drinking skills.

The developmental milestones shown below are evidence-based and can be used as a helpful guide to typical child development, but do remember that all infants are different.

The age at which infants achieve many skills depends on how often they are promoted by parents and carers and performed by the child. It is normal for there to be some variation in the ages at which an infant or toddler achieves a new skill.

Birth to 4 months

	Birth	2 months	3 months
Motor and cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can bring hand to mouth and opens mouth ready to suck 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holds objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holds onto objects and puts them into the mouth
Social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prefers to look at faces Copies adult facial expression Will smile but not socially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By now recognises familiar faces Begins to smile at faces 	
Feeding skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sucking and swallowing seen in the womb Tongue, lips and jaw move together in sucking movement Can move tongue around mouth and in and out of mouth Sucks fist Gags in response to objects in the mouth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can move liquids such as milk from a spoon to the back of the mouth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lips, tongue and jaw begin to move independently Likes to experience and explore different shapes and textures using hands and mouth; this leads in later months to better acceptance of foods with differing textures
Taste, texture and smell preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some strong taste preferences learned from the taste of breast milk, and in the womb from mother's diet Clearly shows likes and dislikes of tastes All infants born liking sweet tastes Some infants born disliking bitter tastes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By now shows a preference for known smells and tastes 	
Signalling hunger, fullness and dislike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turns head in search of nipple Sucks fist when hungry When full, sucks slowly or stops sucking or cries and turns head away from nipple Can show facial expression of dislike or disgust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will play with nipple/teat when no longer hungry 	
Appetite regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can begin to take the amount of milk feed that they need for their growth 'Responsive' feeding (offering feeds when hunger is indicated but not always feeding in response to crying) helps maintain a healthy weight gain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Now completely able to regulate milk intake to meet their growth and energy needs but crying does not always mean that the infant is hungry 	

Developmental stages in infant & toddler feeding

4-6 months

4-6 months

Motor and cognitive development

- Holds, mouths and carefully studies objects
- Some imitation of others' actions
- Can begin to sit alone with some support



Social interaction

- Can tell the difference between others' facial expressions of pleasure and disgust
- Some real imitation of others' facial expression
- Will show interest in turn taking interactions, 'I do something you do something'

Feeding skills

- Opens mouth in response to a spoon
- Can move food to the back of the mouth with tongue
- Will move towards the spoon for liked foods
- Complementary foods can be introduced*
- Can cope with pureed and mashed foods
- Some tongue protrusion as spoon feeding skills are learned

Taste, texture and smell preferences

- No preference for bland tastes
- The more variety of tastes offered the better the acceptance of new foods
- Learns to like and accept complementary foods quickly if offered in this period
- Will accept strong tastes if offered frequently
- Shows preference for some foods and dislikes of some tastes, but will usually accept these if offered again in small portions

Signalling hunger, satiety and dislike

- Moves head towards spoon and opens mouth for food
- Turns away from spoon when no longer hungry and keeps mouth shut
- Gags at disliked foods
- Looks at food that others are eating
- Begins to reach for food
- Starts to hold food and bring to the mouth

Appetite regulation

- Will take less milk if having complementary food so only takes what is needed
- Responds to stressful mealtimes by refusing foods



* The Department of Health recommends that infants should first be given foods other than breast milk at around six months of age. The European guideline for the introduction of complementary foods is between four and six months.

Developmental stages in infant & toddler feeding

6-12 months

	6-8 months	8-12 months	Around 12 months
Motor and cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can begin to sit unsupported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can start to pick up objects using pincer grasp (with finger and thumb) Most infants sit without support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says first words, specific to situation Might say the word for a food they often have Points to things of interest Can begin to understand that similar looking foods might taste the same
Social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begins to show real imitation of other people's behaviour Prefers a smile to a frown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays 'give and take' games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses others' facial expressions as a cue to change behaviour
Feeding skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can chew softer lumps, mash and soft crumble foods, and keep most of the food in the mouth Can close the lips to clear the spoon Learns to move food around the mouth with the tongue, because more solid food is given 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can bite into foods such as a cracker Can bite into hard foods such as apple when front teeth have erupted Begins to feed from spoon without spilling Begins to drink from closed cup Most infants can feed themselves with food held in the hand 	
Taste, texture and smell preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can cope with the introduction of lumpy solids Will try and put liked food in the mouth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better acceptance of lumpy foods the earlier these are introduced Introduction of 'soft chew' foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some infants will be very sensitive to the feel of objects and foods, and dislike foods that are messy or textured. This is an inherited dislike but can be helped with messy play
Signalling hunger, satiety and dislike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gag response becomes less frequent, as infant becomes used to textures and tastes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will give clear signals of dislike; will close mouth, turn head Clear interest in self feeding Points to food they want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will say 'no' to foods they dislike or 'more' for foods that they like

Developmental stages in infant & toddler feeding

12 months-4 years

	12 months	12 months-2years	14/15 months
Motor and cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises food by sight, smell and taste • Uses words to ask for, or names foods that they might want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can group objects and foods into categories based on the way they look 	
Social interaction		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitation of other peoples' behaviour increases and improves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitates eating behaviour and food preferences of adults
Feeding skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can begin to drink from an open cup • Side teeth appear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can cope with most textures offered but chewing not fully mature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most infants can feed themselves with a spoon
Taste, texture and smell preferences		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More likely to eat foods that look like foods that they know they like 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will often try a food if they see an adult eat it
Signalling hunger, satiety and dislike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throws food, signals or says 'no' to unwanted food • Distracted by toys during mealtimes 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets down from chair when no longer hungry or has lost interest in meal
Appetite regulation			

Developmental stages in infant & toddler feeding

12 months–4 years

	20 months	2 years	3–4 years
Motor and cognitive development			
Social interaction		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imitates other toddlers' behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imitates eating behaviour of age-mates Changes food preferences to be like age-mates'
Feeding skills		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can cope with chewing most of the foods given in a family meal 	
Taste, texture and smell preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food disgust and contamination response appears in some children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food preferences seen now predict food preferences throughout childhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows preference for restricted or withheld foods
Signalling hunger, satiety and dislike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The neophobic response 'fear of new foods' appears; new foods rejected, might also reject foods eaten before Food is rejected on sight without tasting 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The range of foods in a young child's diet now predicts the range of foods that will be accepted and rejected in later childhood and adulthood
Appetite regulation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Might overeat if served large portion sizes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some children respond to prompts to overeat whereas other children reduce the amount they eat when pressured

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