

Tips for ECE Providers

Solid foods, such as infant cereals, fruits, vegetables, and meats, are those that are the right texture for an infant's development. They are also called complementary foods because they are given in addition to breast milk and infant formula.

When infants should start solid foods



Around 6 months old, when infants are developmentally ready, they can be introduced to foods in addition to breast milk or infant formula. Introducing solid foods before 4 months is not recommended. Continuing to breastfeed while introducing solid foods through 2 years or older is recommended.

Signs of readiness include when the infant can:

- Sit with or without support.
- Control their head and neck.
- Open their mouth when food is offered.
- Swallow food rather than push it out.

How to talk to parents, caregivers, and guardians about feeding

As an ECE provider, families are your partners. The decision of when and how to introduce solid food is made by the child's parents with your support. Families come from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, and every child is different. Encourage frequent and open communication so you can learn more about the children in your care. Talking regularly with parents helps you know when a child has started solid foods, which foods to give or avoid, and how to feed them. Here are tips to start the conversation:

- Ask parents what and how they are feeding their child and how you can support them.
- Talk with parents about the signs of readiness to start solid foods and develop a plan.
- Ask parents if their child has any special dietary needs, food allergies, or food intolerances. If so, be sure to have a plan for the child.
- Educate yourself on feeding solid foods and how to safely prepare children's food at your facility.
- Check the resources section below for more communication tools you can use with parents.



Foods and drinks appropriate for 6- to 24-month-olds

Families, with your support, should let the child try one new food at a time at first. This helps you see if they have any problems with that food, such as food allergies. Wait 3 to 5 days between each new food offered.

Child Age	Foods and Drinks to Encourage	Foods and Drinks to Avoid/Limit
6 to 12 months 	• Fruits and vegetables • Whole grains • Meat, meat alternatives, legumes • Small amounts of water • Pasteurized yogurts and cheeses • Breast milk or infant formula	Avoid: • Food/drinks with added sugars • Food that is fried or high in salt • Unpasteurized foods/drinks • Caffeinated drinks Avoid before 12 months: • Honey • Juice (including 100% juice) • Cow's milk, fortified dairy alternatives (e.g., almond or soymilk)
Older than 12 months 	• Fruits and vegetables • Whole grains • Meat, meat alternatives, legumes • Water • Breast milk • Dairy and fortified dairy alternatives (e.g., almond or soymilk)	Avoid: • Food/drinks with added sugars • Food that is fried or high in salt • Unpasteurized foods/drinks • Caffeinated drinks Limit: • 100% juice

Allergies and intolerances

You may get questions from parents about food allergies or food intolerances. Children with food allergies should have a care plan created with their primary healthcare provider that includes their allergies, how to avoid foods containing the allergen, and a treatment plan if the child has an allergic reaction. Here are some other helpful tips when caring for children with allergies:

- Post each child's food allergy and list of foods to avoid in a place every provider can easily see it. Update the list regularly.
- Watch for signs of an allergic reaction during and after feeding new foods. Hives, skin rash, diarrhea, vomiting, and trouble breathing are common symptoms of an allergic reaction. Notify a child's parent immediately if an allergic reaction occurs.
- Ensure that you have medicine and treatment instructions for children with allergies in your care.
- Watch children carefully during feeding times to make sure they don't share food.

Responding to hunger or fullness cues

As an ECE provider you can practice responsive feeding, which means you provide the healthy food options, but you listen and respond to a child's hunger or fullness cues, some of which are listed below. This will help build healthy eating habits during this important period of growth.



Signs a child may be hungry:

- Reaches for or points to food.
- Opens mouth when offered a spoon or food.
- Gets excited when they see food.
- Uses hand motions or makes sounds.



Signs a child may be full:

- Pushes food away.
- Closes mouth when food is offered.
- Turns head away from food.
- Uses hand motions or makes sounds to let you know they are full.

Feeding solid foods to children in your care

An infant may start out with smooth or mashed foods first and then begin to eat finely chopped or ground foods as he or she gets older. For infants under 12 months, sit within an arm's reach during meals. For children older than 12 months, sit at the same table or closer.

Mealtime tips:

- Wash your hands and the child's hands before mealtime.
- The child should always be seated while eating.
- Mealtime should be fun! Talk with the child and limit distractions.
- Mealtime is messy and that's OK. Exploring solid foods helps children learn about different tastes and textures.
- Encourage the child to start eating foods with his or her fingers and eventually child-sized utensils.
- Check with a child's parent before trying a new food.

Are parents concerned about picky eating?

Children may need to try some foods more than 10 times before they like them. Try these tips:

- Feed small portions of different kinds of food.
- Wait a few days before you try a new food again.
- Try mixing new food with a food the child likes.
- Assure parents that you will continue to support their children in trying new foods.
- Be patient!



Preventing choking

The way food is prepared may increase the risk for choking. Some foods that are served uncooked, whole, or in certain shapes or sizes can be choking hazards. Cutting up food into smaller pieces and mashing foods can help prevent choking. Avoid serving children under 4 years old popcorn, spoonfuls of nut butter, whole grapes and cheese cubes, as these are common choking hazards. Always supervise children while they eat.

Help prevent a child from choking by:

- Having the child sit up while eating (no lying down).
- Having the child sit in a highchair or other safe place, not a stroller.
- Keeping mealtimes calm and not rushed.
- Paying close attention to what the child puts in their mouth.

Additional Resources

Share this information with the parents of children in your care and encourage them to bring questions to their child's next checkup with their doctor.

Nutrition Resources:

- [Infant and Toddler Nutrition](#)
- [Feeding Infants in the Child and Adult Care Food Program](#)
- [Mealtimes With Toddlers in the CACFP](#)
- [Communication Tools for Parents](#)
- [Reducing the Risk of Choking in Young Children at Mealtimes](#)
- [Child and Adult Care Food Program for Operators](#)

Professional Development Opportunities:

- [Healthy Kids, Healthy Future: Nurture Healthy Eaters — Better Kid Care — Penn State Extension](#)
- [Picky Eaters: A Guide to Responsive Feeding — Better Kid Care — Penn State Extension](#)

Check with your state health department for other opportunities.

