

# Feeding

for the child with cerebral palsy



 Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy

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# FEEDING

## for the child with cerebral palsy

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Positioning 1

- Seating your child on the lap 1
- Independent sitting 2
- Adapted floor seating 3
- Adapted chairs 5
- Positioning for special problems 7

Eating 9

- Food 10
- Feeding with a spoon 11
- Chewing 12
- Biting 13
- Swallowing 13
- Drooling 14
- Choking 15

• Vomiting	17
• Problem behaviour during eating	17
• Rinsing	18
• Eating without help	20
• Special spoons	21
• Types of plates	23
• Teaching independent eating	24
• Teaching other skills while feeding	28
Drinking	29

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## Foreword

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**B**arely three decades ago, the majority of children with severe developmental disabilities like cerebral palsy were regarded as ineducable. However, in the last few years, there has been a marked increase in the awareness of cerebral palsy and its implications. The most significant realisation has been the fact that the education of a child with a disability is not concerned merely with his intellectual development. The management of a child in every sphere of daily living is of equal importance. Consequently, an interdisciplinary and integrated approach is essential for achieving the maximum progress of a child.

Parents play a primary role in teaching their child the various skills of daily living. Undoubtedly, the parents have the best understanding of their disabled child, but they may often be unaware of the best way to go about this enormous task.

The Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy (IICP) is the training and research division of the Spastics Society of Eastern India. The need for *more* information on cerebral palsy has long been felt both by parents and professionals. With this objective in mind, the IICP has planned to produce a series of books and booklets, written by a team of special educators, therapists and social workers. It is hoped that the easy-to-follow guidelines and illustrations will help parents in the daily management programme of their child.

A disabled child has the desire as well as the ability to learn different skills. With time, effort and constant encouragement, he will eventually achieve results to the best of his ability.



**M**any children with cerebral palsy have problems in eating and drinking which can cause a lot of difficulty for the parents. However with appropriate management, these problems can be reduced considerably.

It is important to remember that the sooner correct management is introduced, the better are the chances of reducing the problems. The first step to appropriate management is seating your child correctly while he is eating and drinking.

## POSITIONING

Mentioned below are some ways of seating your child which will be more comfortable for him. The positions will also make it easier for you to feed him.

### SEATING YOUR CHILD ON THE LAP

A mother usually feeds a child who is very young by making him sit on her lap.

Let your child sit on your lap. Place your arm around his neck so that his head is kept straight and facing forward. This position is suitable while he is being fed or given a drink.

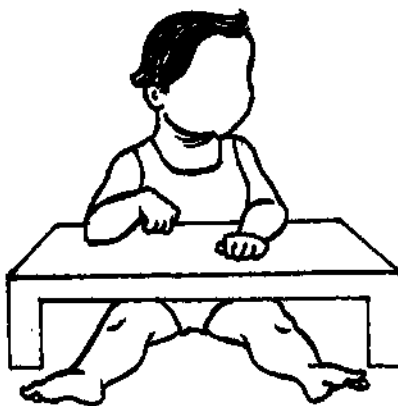


**Do not feed your child while he is lying on your lap as there is a danger of choking.**

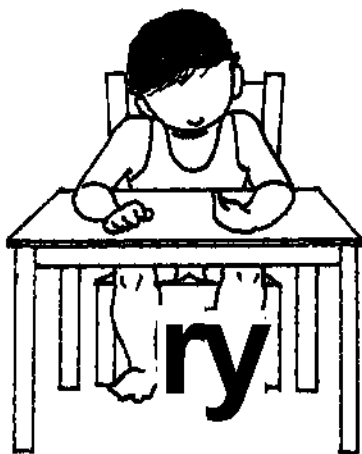
To make feeding and drinking easier for your child, try and get your child to sit by himself on the floor or on a chair if he can! It will also make him more independent.

## INDEPENDENT SITTING

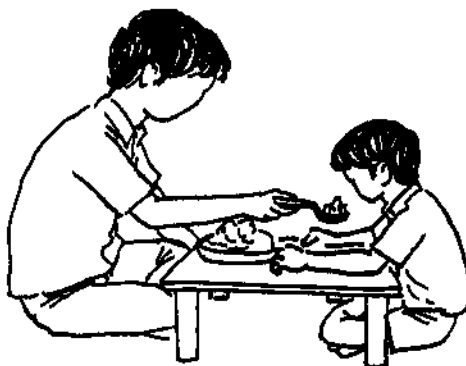
If your child can sit by himself, you can place him on the floor for feeding. A floor table can be put in front of him. In this way, he will spill food while eating.



You can also seat him on a chair with a table kept in front. The height of the chair should be such that his feet are flat on the ground.



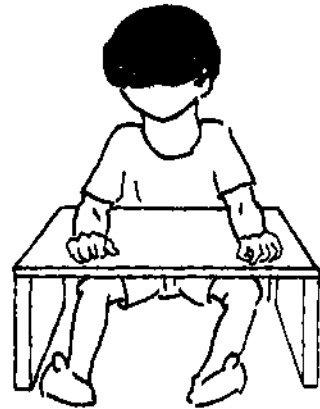
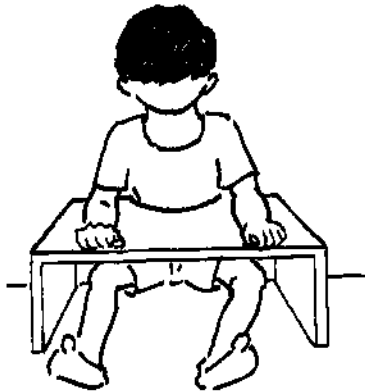
It is more convenient to feed your child when you sit facing him.



## ADAPTED FLOOR SEATING

If your child cannot sit by himself on the floor or on a chair, placing him in one of the following positions may be helpful.

If your child has not learnt to sit by himself without support, then seat him against the wall and place a floor table in front of him. The table will give him support from the front.



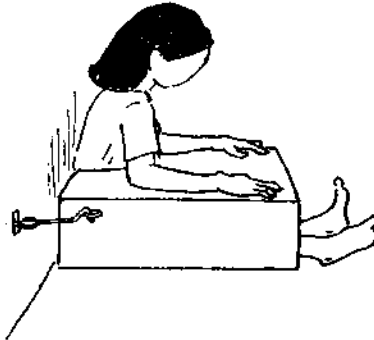
if the floor table does not give enough support, your child may still tend to fall sideways. In this case, a cut-out table will be more comfortable. It will fit around his chest and also give support to his elbows.



If your child needs more support, then make her sit in the corner of a room on a cushion or on a rolled up blanket. Place a floor table or a cut-out table in front of her to provide additional support.



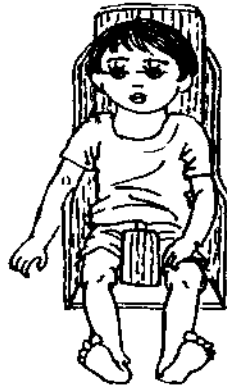
If you find that your child is pushing away the cut-out table, you can fix it to the wall with latches. This will secure it firmly in place while the child is being fed or is eating by herself.



You may find it difficult to seat your child in the positions mentioned earlier due to his physical problems or his lack of understanding. A list of adapted seats is given below. When you choose a seat for your child, consider the difficulties he has as well as the space available in your house.

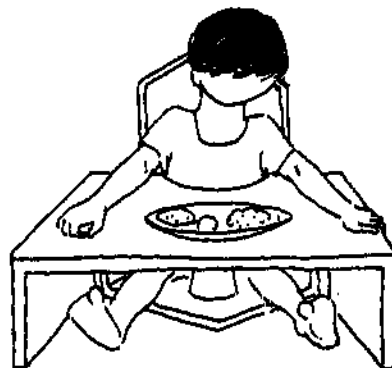


If your child is able to hold up his head, place him in a corner seat. If he tends to fall or slip forward, fix a cylindrical block of wood in the seat between his legs. This will prevent him from slipping forward.

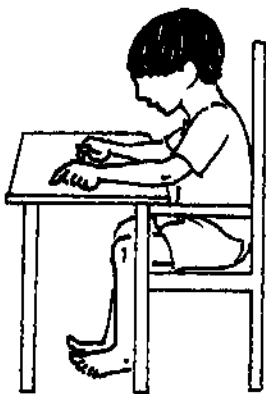


Try using a floor seat if your child still continues to have problems. This kind of seat will give more support to the back and sides. If he slips forward while sitting, then fix a cylindrical block of wood on the seat between the child's legs.

Your child can be fed while he is sitting in a corner seat or a floor seat by placing a small floor table or a cut-out table in front of him.



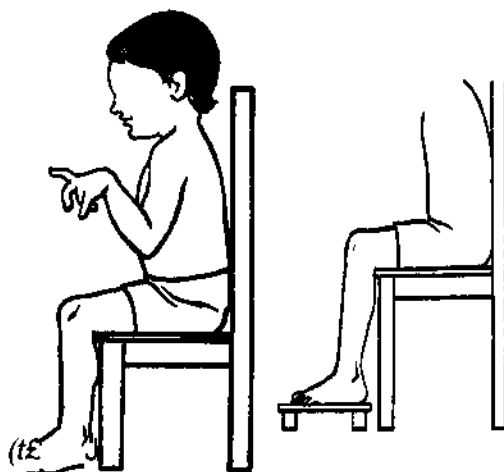
## ADAPTED CHAIRS



If your child finds it difficult to sit on a chair without arms, make him sit on a chair with arms and place a table in front of him.

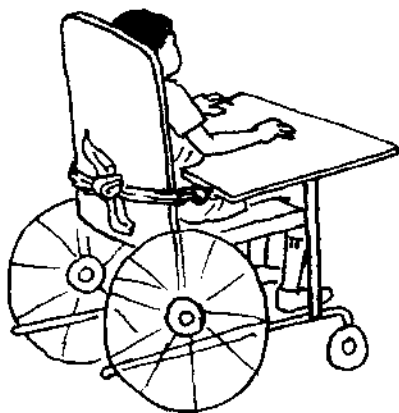
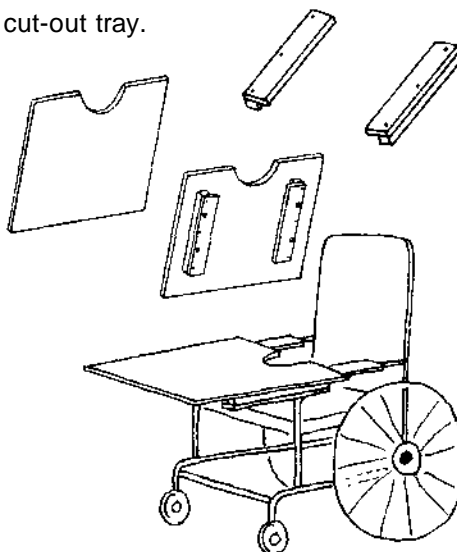
The chair should be of the correct measurement and height so that his thighs are supported by the seat and his feet are resting flat on the ground. If the chair is too high, you can place a stool under his feet.

In case your child tends to slip off the chair, fix a cylindrical block of wood on the seat of the chair.



If your child is on a wheelchair, then use a cut-out tray.

Two long pieces of wood are attached length-wise underneath the cut-out tray, at both ends. Grooves are cut on these pieces which enable you to slide the tray over the arms of the wheelchair and hold it firmly in place.



If the tray still tends to slip forward, attach two hooks on either side of the cut-out tray. Put some thick string or cloth through these hooks and tie the tray securely to the wheelchair.

Before you make your child sit on his new seat to feed him, let him use the seat during play or any other activity. This will ensure that he does not feel uncomfortable or insecure during feeding. Your child should use the seat regularly in order to get used to it.

## POSITIONING FOR SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Sometimes it might be difficult for you to feed your child even with the help of the adapted seats. This may be due to the following reasons:

- The child may keep his head stiffly turned to any one side or push it backwards.



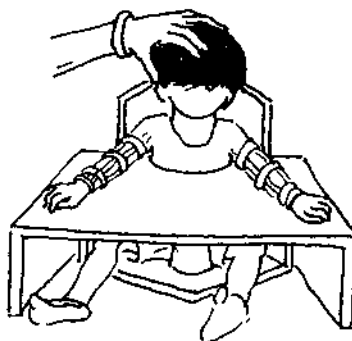
Hold the top of his head with one hand and help him to face forward, keeping his head straight. This will make it easier for you to handle him during feeding.

- You may also find it difficult to feed him if he cannot control the movement of his arms during feeding.



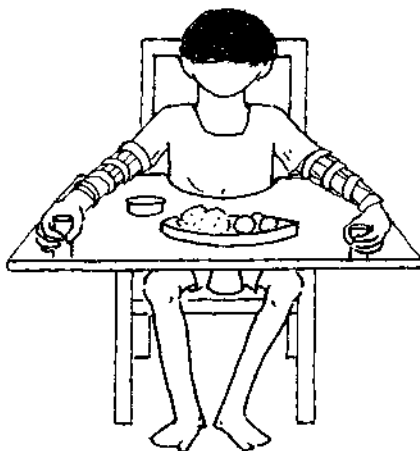
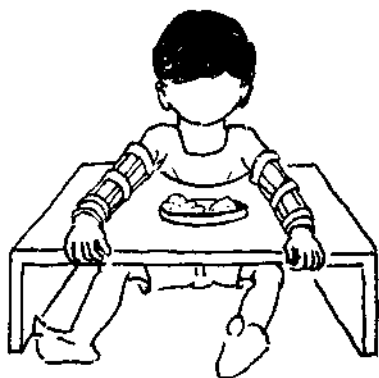
After putting him on his adapted seat, tie a pair of gaiters on his arms to keep them straight.

If his head tends to extend backwards, hold the top of his head firmly and bring it forward.



Put gaiters on his arms if they come in the way of his plate. Help him to hold on to the end of the table or a fixed peg in order to prevent his arms from moving around.

However, if he is moving his arms purposely, then you may have to initially keep the food on a separate table.





# EATING

It is important to start teaching a handicapped child to eat independently as early as possible. The earlier you start the training, the better will be the progress.

It is important to keep a few things in mind before you start teaching your child.

If your child is still on a liquid diet, gradually start giving him solid food such as

- a. Suji and milk or bread and milk.

Start giving him solid food like rice or roti to help him to learn to bite and chew.

- b. Use a steel spoon which is neither too deep nor too big for your child's mouth.
- c. A child with a physical disability often does not move around as much as other children. Therefore, he may need less food, especially carbohydrates. Hence food such as potatoes, rice, bread, ghee and butter should not be given too often. It may make your child gain weight and make it more difficult for him to move

Do not overfeed him. A child who is never hungry is not likely to cooperate when you try and feed him. Overfeeding may also make him vomit.

- d. It is very important to remember to place your child in a correct position. (Refer to the earlier section on 'Positioning'.) It will be much easier for your child to learn how to eat if he is sitting comfortably. Ensure that his head is slightly forward. This will help him to chew and swallow the food more easily.

## FOOD

It is important that you teach your handicapped child to eat normal solid food as early as possible.

If he is four or five months old, he should have semi-solid food like mashed potato, mashed banana, suji and milk.

By the age of 10 or 12 months, he should start eating solid food like rice, roti, vegetables and fruits.

If your child is older but still on a liquid diet, start by giving him semi-solids with a spoon.

Once he gets used to semi-solids, gradually start giving him solid food. This will take time but if you give it regularly, he will learn quickly. He will cooperate more willingly if you give him the solid food when he is hungry. To start with, give him the kind of solid food he enjoys.

Give your child a variety of food with different tastes such as sweet, salty and sour. Give him the opportunity to have an assortment of food with different textures like chips, sugar cane, muri or biscuits.

Give your child the opportunity to:

- a) make a choice of food offered to him
- b) refuse what he does not like
- c) ask for food when he is hungry
- d) ask for more food during a meal.

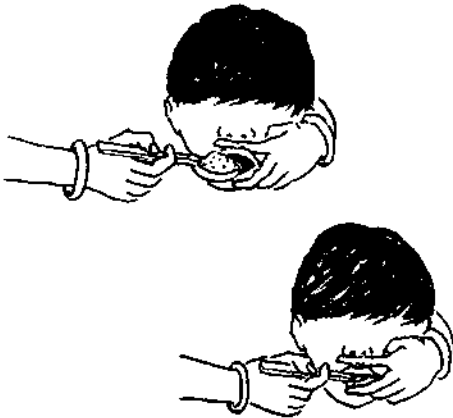
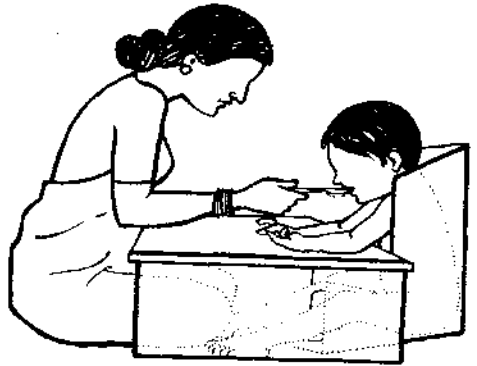
He can do this by:

- i) pointing to the preferred food
- ii) saying the word
- iii) pointing to the picture of the food. You must provide him with the pictures.

## FEEDING WITH A SPOON

Mothers usually start to feed their children solid food with their fingers. However, a child with cerebral palsy may have to be taught how to open and close his mouth as well as how to chew and swallow food. It is easier to teach a child to do this if you use a spoon.

You can sit opposite your child to feed him with a spoon. Sometimes you may find it easier if you sit by his side.



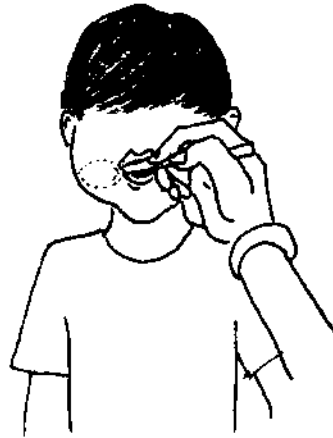
If he does not close his lips over the spoon when it is inside his mouth, gently press his lips together around the spoon with your fingers. Make sure that you do not scrape the food against the child's teeth. Then pull out the spoon slowly. Once he learns to close his lips over the spoon, gradually reduce your help.

## CHEWING

### Does your child find it difficult to chew?

If your child is unable to chew solid food like rice, roti or biscuits, start by giving him semi-solid food like mashed potato, boiled apple, suji and milk. Gradually introduce him to normal solid food.

Help him to learn to chew by placing the food in one side of his mouth, between his cheek and teeth.



Then gently make circular movements on the child's cheeks with your fingers.

## BITING

### Does your child find it difficult to bite solid food?

If your child finds it difficult to bite solid food like roti, biscuits, toast or fruits, start by teaching him to bite soft solid food like bananas or finger chips. Introduce the solid food gradually.

Help him to learn to bite by placing the food between his teeth. You can sit by his side and place your arm around his neck. Close his mouth by gently pushing his chin upward. Be very careful that you do not push his head back.



## SWALLOWING

### Does your child find it difficult to swallow food?

Your child may be finding it difficult to swallow food because:

- He is not sitting properly. Seat him comfortably and keep his head well forward while he is being fed.
- He is not chewing the food properly. Teach him to chew. Refer to 'Biting' and 'Chewing'.



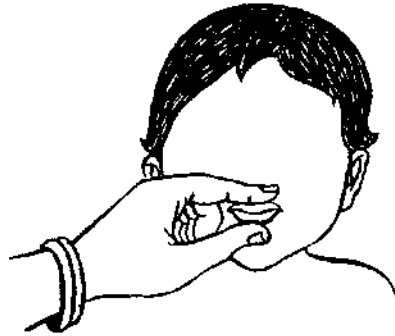
To help him to swallow, stroke his throat gently with your fingers. Make sure that you keep his head bent slightly forward while you do this.

## DROOLING

### Does your child drool while eating?

One way to decrease drooling is to continuously remind your child to close his mouth and swallow.

If your child cannot follow your instructions, help him to close his mouth by gently pressing his lips together while the food is in his mouth.

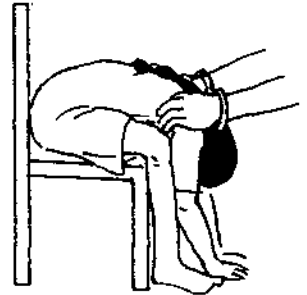


After he has chewed the food, gently stroke his throat with your fingers. This will help him to swallow.

## CHOKING

Does your child choke sometimes while eating?

If your child chokes, bend her body forward and downward.



**Never tap your child on the back or on his head. It may make it worse.**

In order to prevent choking, the following steps can be helpful:

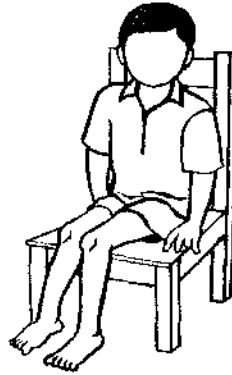
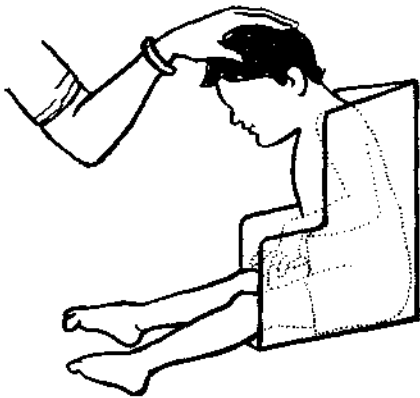


or sitting against the wall

Always make sure that your child is in an upright position. This is necessary whether he is sitting on your lap



or on a chair.



Always keep his head bent slightly forward. If the head falls back, it may cause him to choke.

Place the food on either side of the mouth between his cheek and teeth. It should not be put in the middle of his mouth.



Introduce small amounts of food into your child's mouth. This will reduce the chances of choking. Make sure that he has swallowed the food in his mouth before you give him more food.



## **VOMITING**

### **Does your child have a tendency to vomit when you feed him?**

Your child may vomit for several reasons. It may be because he is not hungry. Feed him less during each meal. You can reduce the number of meals or give him food a little later.

### **Do not force your child to eat when he is not hungry.**

Teach your child to say "No" or to shake his head and indicate that he does not want to eat.

Your child may not be chewing his food properly. This can also make him vomit. Give him practice in chewing solid food. Refer to 'Chewing' where management of chewing solid food has been discussed.

You may feel that your child is only trying to seek your attention by refusing his food. In this case, leave him for a while and try to feed him again later.

## **PROBLEM BEHAVIOURS DURING EATING**

It is important to remember that sometimes feeding may become very difficult if your child does not cooperate. He may cry, spit out the food, refuse to sit quietly or even throw the food.

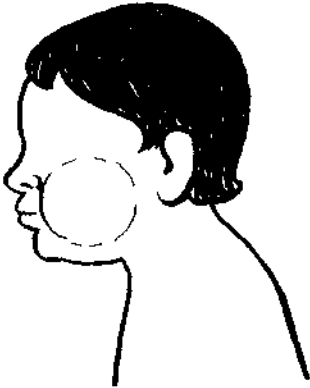
To overcome these problems, you must reward your child with something he really loves every time he cooperates with you. It could be with sweets, pickles or a favourite toy. Follow this routine regularly and consistently.

You will find a definite improvement in his behaviour. Reduce the reward gradually until you need to give it only at the end of the meal.

## RINSING

At the end of every meal, ensure that no food is left in your child's mouth. You can teach him to clean his mouth by:

a) sipping water



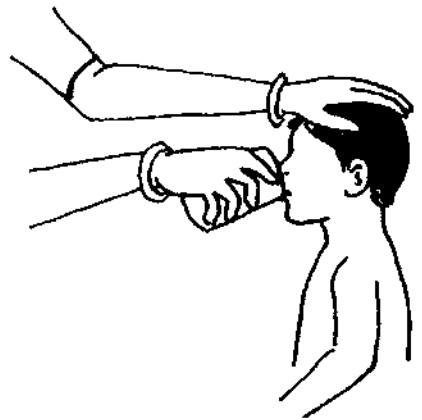
b) gargling



c) and then spitting out the water.

However, if he is unable to do this, ensure that he drinks a glass of water after every meal. This will help to clean the inside of his mouth.

Alternatively, allow him to sip water



and then tip his head forward. In this way, most of the water will come out. This will help to clean the inside of his mouth.

## EATING WITHOUT HELP

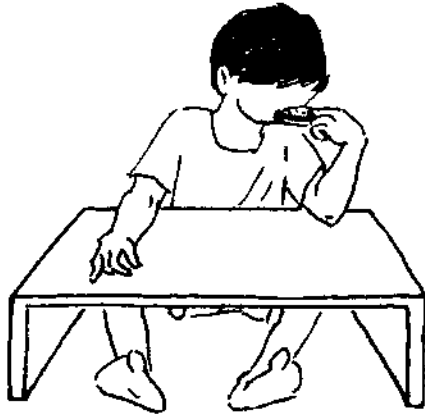
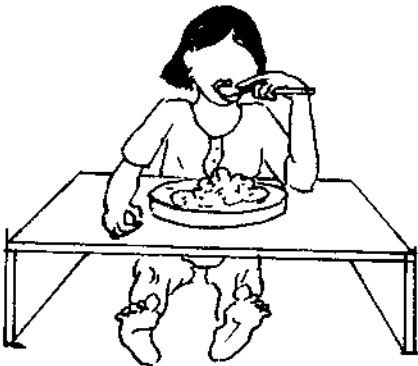
Normally a child starts to eat by himself from an early age. Owing to his disability, your child may be unable to eat on his own. So it is necessary to feed him. But given an opportunity to learn, many handicapped children can eat without help.

Your child is ready to learn to eat independently if he can:

- sit comfortably with or without support
- take his hand to his mouth
- bite, chew and swallow solid food.

Some points which may help are:

He can start holding a roti or a biscuit and taking it to his mouth.



She can also start holding the spoon and taking it to her mouth. Initially, you will need to direct the spoon. Refer to 'Eating with a Spoon'.

## **When he starts —**

- 1) Make him eat a few mouthfuls of food himself. In the beginning, he may be clumsy or untidy. However, he will improve with practice.
- 2) Teach him to eat on his own when he is hungry. Let him 'ask' for the food he loves.
- 3) Allow him to eat with whichever hand he finds easier— left or right.
- 4) Praise him every time he eats by himself. You can even give him some chutney or salad or a small piece of sweet as a reward after every two or three spoonfuls of food. Never mix sweets with the rest of his food in order to encourage him to eat.

## **SPECIAL SPOONS**

Some children who are physically handicapped may find it difficult to eat with their fingers.

A handicapped child may be able to learn to eat on his own if he is taught to eat with a spoon.

The type of spoon and plate that is used for your child is very important. Correct positioning also helps a child to eat by himself. Some points which may help are discussed in the following pages.

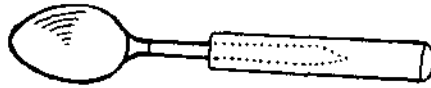
Use a medium sized spoon which is neither too big nor too small for your child. The spoon should not be too deep. It should be unbreakable.



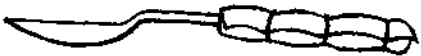
If your child cannot hold the spoon with a firm grip, pad the handle of the spoon to make it thicker.



You can do this by inserting the spoon into a cylindrical piece of wood and making a thick handle.

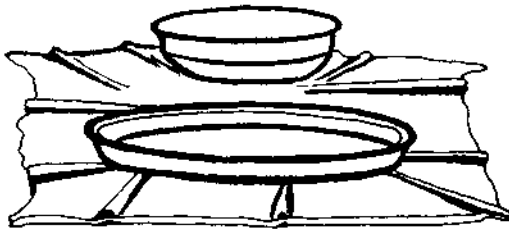


You can also pad the handle with sponge or wrap a cloth around it.



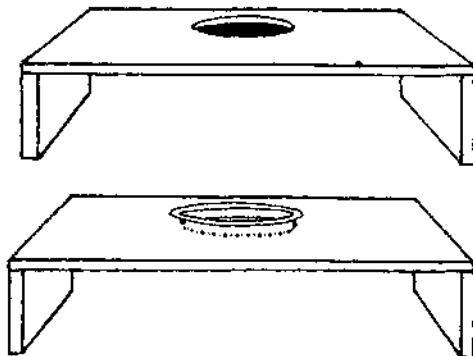
## TYPES OF PLATES

Use a thali with a high edge or a bowl. This will make it easier for your child to scoop the food with a spoon.



To prevent the thali or plate from slipping, place a wet jharan under it.

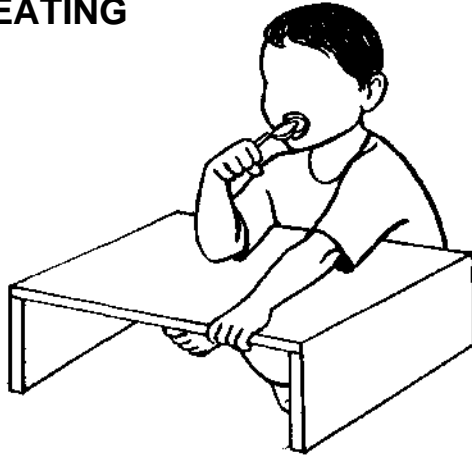
You can cut round holes on a wooden tray and fix it on a table. The thali and glass should fit into these holes.



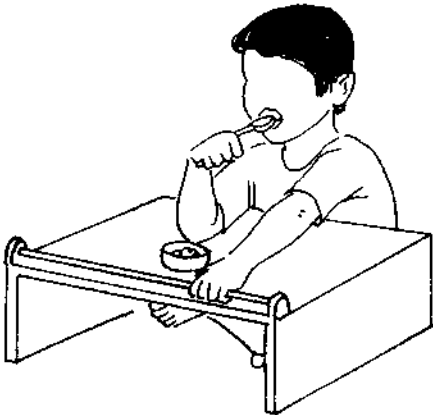
Alternatively, you can cut a round hole on a floor table into which the thali fits.

## TEACHING INDEPENDENT EATING

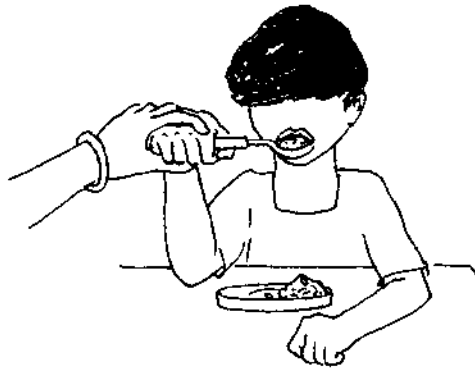
Always place the elbow of the hand he will eat with on the table. This will help to keep his hand steady. Place his other arm across the table. If he is able to, he can hold the edge of the table to keep himself steady.



You can fix a bar on the table. He can hold the bar to keep himself steady.

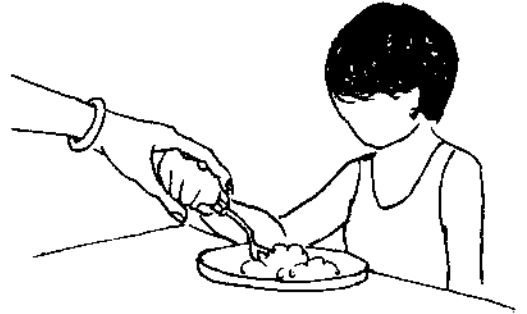


Sit facing him when you teach him to eat with a spoon. Help him to hold the spoon with his dominant hand, which may be either the left or the right one. Put the spoon in his palm. Hold his wrist between your thumb and fingers. If his fingers tend to open, your thumb can keep them closed around the spoon.





Help him to scoop up the food in this position.

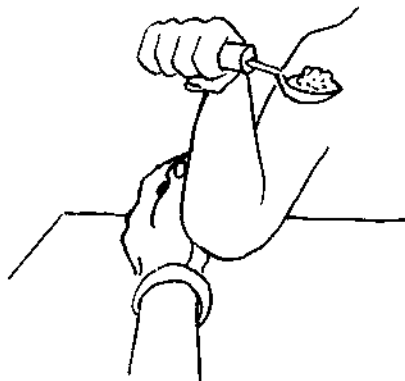
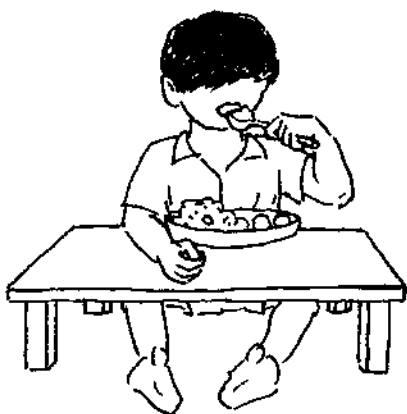


Take the spoon to his mouth and bring it back to the plate.

As he improves and learns each step, reduce your help by holding him at the wrist.



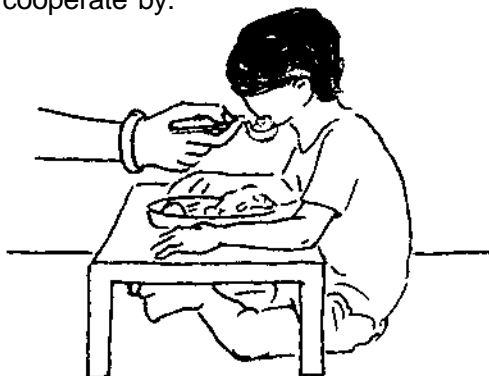
Gradually give help by holding his elbow only when he needs support.



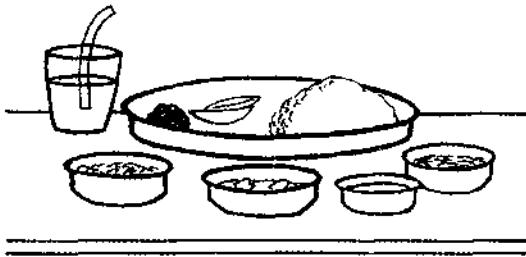
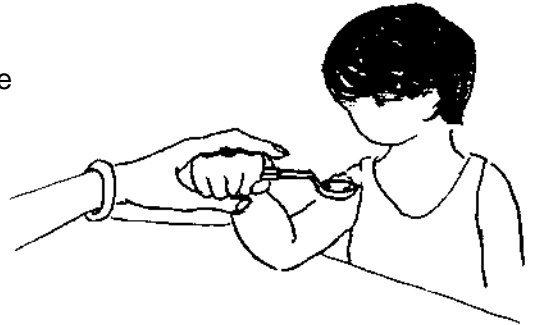
He may ultimately learn to eat without your help by using his dominant hand.

Children with very severe physical problems may never learn to eat on their own. In such cases, you can teach the child to cooperate by:

- a. Bringing his head forward when he takes food into his mouth from the spoon.



b. Chewing and swallowing the food without spilling.



c. Eating all types of food.

## TEACHING OTHER SKILLS WHILE FEEDING

Feeding time can be used to teach your child many things;

a) You can teach him the names of:

- Objects — glass, thali, spoon.
- Food Items — rice, roti, dal.
- Taste -- sweet, sour, bitter.

b) You can teach him manners:

- Eating without spilling food on the table.
- Eating with one hand only.
- Saying "thank you".

c) Meal times give a chance to teach your non-verbal child to communicate by using pictures or by pointing to the objects.

Give him the opportunity to:

- Ask for food or drink.
- Refuse if he has eaten enough.
- Talk about the different kinds of food he eats.

This may help to improve his skills to communicate.

## DRINKING

A baby would normally be breast-fed and drink water from a bottle.



As he learns to sit up by six or eight months, he starts drinking from a glass.

Because of his physical handicap, your child may not have learnt to hold his head erect and sit up by six or eight months.

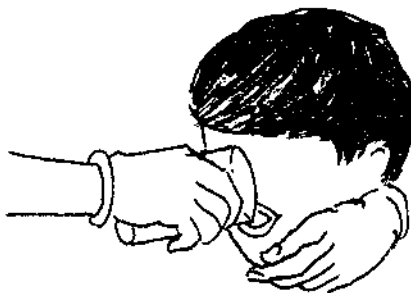
However, it is still important that you teach him to drink from a glass as soon as possible. This can be done by putting him in an upright position.



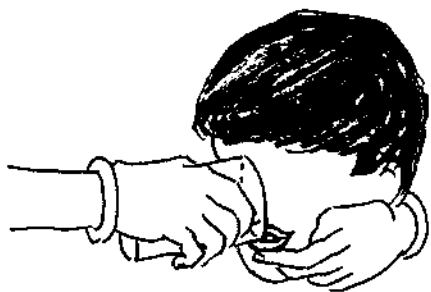
Your child may have problems while drinking. Some of these are mentioned below. Identify his problems before you start teaching him to drink correctly. This should be done at the earliest opportunity.

**Does your child's head fall forward or backward when you make him sit up and drink?**

If it does, place your arm around his neck. With the same hand, hold his chin from below. Hold the glass with your other hand and take it to his lips. Ensure that you do not tip his head backwards.



**Does your child find it difficult to sip when you hold the glass to his lips?**



If he finds it difficult, teach him to close his lips around the rim of the glass. Hold the rim of the glass between his lips, not his teeth, and gently push his lower lip against the glass. This will help him to close his lips around the glass and sip.

Do not have too much water in the glass. Tilt the glass to allow only a little water to go into the child's mouth.

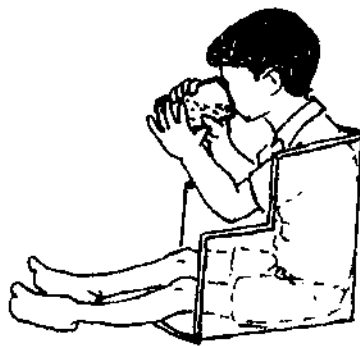
Your child will gradually learn to manage without your help. He may spill some water while drinking, but this will reduce with continued practice.

**Remember that you should not allow your child to hold the rim of the glass between his teeth.**

**Always give him a steel or a plastic glass that will not crack or break.**

**Does your child find it difficult to hold the glass himself and drink?**

Start by helping him to sit in a comfortable position. You can make him sit on the floor

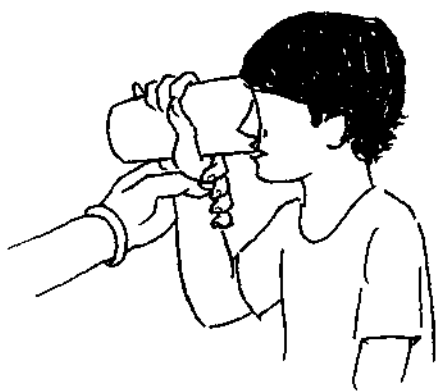


or in a corner seat

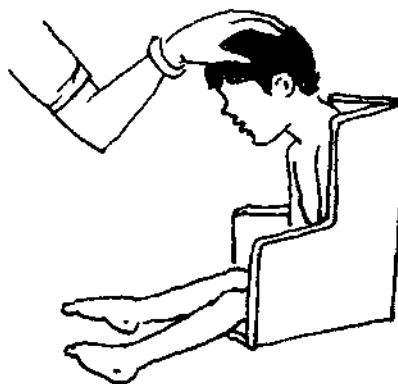
or on a chair with a table in front.



Place both his elbows firmly on the table. This will give him better control over his arms and help him to control his action of drinking.



If necessary, help him by holding his wrist and directing his hand holding the glass towards his mouth.



Teach him to keep his head well forward while drinking. Do not allow him to push his head backwards.

In spite of all your assistance, your child may find it difficult to hold the glass because of his inability to grasp properly.

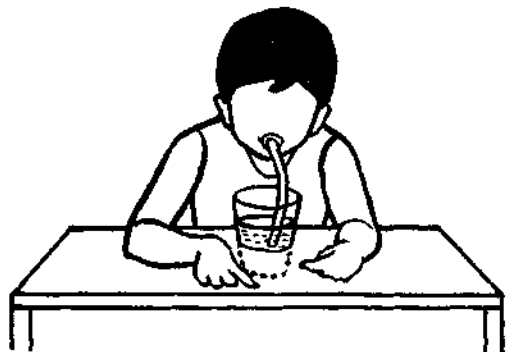


If he cannot manage to hold a glass, give him a mug with a large handle. This will be easier for him to grasp.

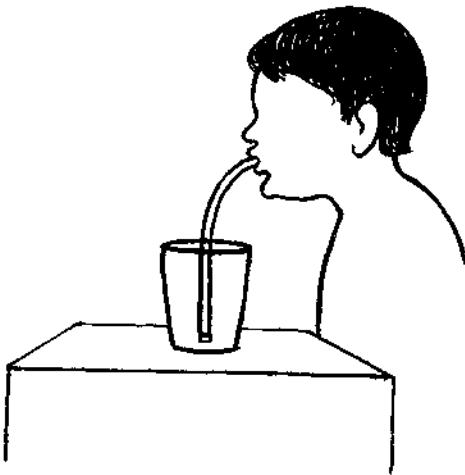
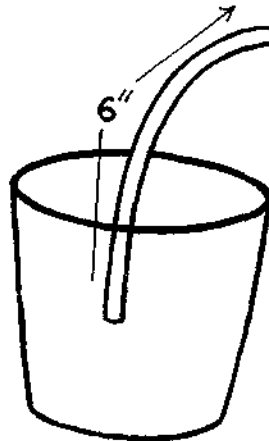


You can help him to hook his fingers through the handle of a cup and hold it.

If your child still finds it a problem to hold a glass and drink, teach him to use a straw. Drinking with a straw can be taught to a child who is able to understand your instructions. A child who can drink from a glass can also be taught to use a straw. It will be an additional skill for them.



Seat him in the correct position and place a table in front of him. Initially use a short straw with a length of about 6". It should be a transparent plastic tube as in water bottles, with a diameter of 1/4".



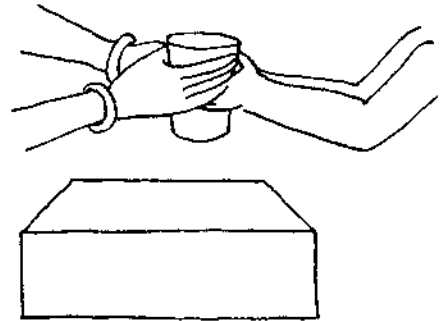
Your child will find it easier to suck from a short straw. Place the straw in a cup of water or milk and hold it near his mouth. Teach him to hold the straw between his lips and not his teeth.

Show him how to suck so that your child can imitate the action. Initially he may spill a lot of water while drinking. But this will reduce with continued practice.

When he has learnt to suck from a short straw, give him a longer straw. If he can manage, give him an ordinary straw that is commercially available. Put the longer straw into a glass. The glass should be close enough for your child to bring his head forward and drink.

**If your child can hold a glass and drink, can he put back the glass upright on the table?**

If this is a problem, teach your child to put back the glass on the table by holding his hand and guiding it. Give him a lot of practice until he is able to put back the glass himself.



Some children with behaviour problems throw down the glass after drinking. If your child does this, reprimand him.

If that does not work, put your hand over his hand as soon as he finishes drinking. Guide him to bring the glass back to the table and release it. To emphasize that he has done the correct action, you can reward him by:

- praising him
- patting his back
- giving him something he enjoys like a small piece of sweet.

This will act as a reinforcement and he may soon learn to put down the glass on the table without your guidance.

## Remember

- Always make your child sit up before you give him something to eat or drink. Do not give him liquids or solids in a lying or a semi-lying position. This will increase the chances of choking.
- Encourage your child to take sips of liquid from a glass. Do not use a 'jhinuk' or a spoon or a glass to pour water into his mouth.
- Give your child the drink he likes best when you teach him to drink. It could be lassi, fresh lime juice or milk.
- Help your child to eat and drink correctly every day. Allow him to make a choice from different food items and drinks during his meals or snacks.
- Teach him to ask for food or a drink when he is hungry or thirsty in any way that he prefers. It could be by talking, gesturing or pointing to a picture.
- All handicapped children may not become totally independent. However, each child will improve to the best of his ability.